

A muscular man with a cowboy hat and an open denim shirt is the central figure. He is holding the brim of his hat with both hands. The background is a warm, golden sunset over a field.

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# ADAM'S OUTLAW



SANDRA CHASTAIN

# Adam's Outlaw

Sandra Chastain



Loveswept®

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“Hold it right there, friend.”

An intense circle of light suddenly flooded the path. The elderly man shuffling along stopped and hunched over his cane. Silence seemed to envelop the park. Only the sound of distant laughter and traffic penetrated the hush.

“Do exactly as I tell you.”

The intruder didn’t need a speaker horn to magnify the threat in his voice.

“Stay cool, Fred,” Toni Gresham whispered from her perch on the limb of a massive oak tree. “Don’t move, we got him.” She held her breath, gripping her whistle in one hand.

Fred swayed unsteadily, playing out his role, just as they’d done on the other nights. Now all she had to do was pretend to be the law, blow her whistle, and frighten the mugger away.

But this man didn’t look like the other muggers they’d scared off. This man was big and mean, and as he stood in the half-light she could see that he had a gun. Toni didn’t think a mere whistle was going to be enough. Maybe she could distract him while Fred went for help.

Maybe whales bought shoes and took up tap dancing.

At the edge of the trees Adam Ware fanned his flashlight slowly up and down the path. Several minutes ago he’d spotted the old man who had veered off onto the seldom-used path. At first Adam was simply going to warn him that there were muggers in the park. When the old man’s stance changed from merely old to crippled, Adam wondered if he was actually inviting someone to follow him. On closer examination, Adam decided the man wasn’t old, and he wasn’t some bum looking for a place to sleep.

Following him through the woods along the path, Adam had realized the man was like a swamp hen, trying to lure a predator away from the nest, or to the nest. He’d found his mugger, or one half of the mugging team. Where was his fellow conspirator?

Up in the tree, Toni waited, checking out the enemy. Like a commando on a night mission, the bad guy was dressed in camouflage black and green, and combat boots. An olive-green sweatband encircled his forehead, holding back his thick, dark hair. Balancing his tall, muscular frame lithely on the balls of his feet, he stood like a jungle animal ready to spring.

“All right, now,” the stranger directed calmly. “Throw down your weapon and step forward—very slowly.” He casually laid his hand on the gun sheathed in a leather holster.

In answer to his command the bald man dropped his cane and ambled toward Adam, smiling hugely.

“Yo, dude, I got no sweat. My money’s yours, no regret.” He slapped his thighs rhythmically and held up his hands in a gesture of resignation. “I say, hang loose.

You've cooked my goose. Just take my funds and I'll vamoose. You dig, man?"

"Well, well, if it isn't Dead Fred. Cut the rap, Fred, and spread 'em! You're under arrest. When did you start stalking the park?"

Toni's heart plunged to the tips of her scuffed Reeboks. They'd made a mistake. The man confronting Fred was no mugger. This stranger was the law, and from the looks of him, he meant business.

"Yo!" Fred exclaimed. "Captain Adam. No attack. The moon is bright. The night is right. Let Dead Fred go and he's out of sight."

Let Fred go? Toni thought. The man below wasn't about to do that. She'd better move fast before Dead Fred dropped the jive talk and did something dumb like rush the man with the gun. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that he'd do just that to keep her from being caught. She'd gotten Fred into this and she'd have to get him out.

Toni waited as the intruder walked toward Fred, thankfully stopping beyond her tree, so that his back was to her. Quietly, she crept along the massive limb to the trunk, where they'd secured the rope she'd used to climb up the tree. The braided hemp was no jungle vine, and she was no Johnny Weissmuller, but this was war. She wound the rope around her waist, held on for dear life, and pushed off into the darkness with reckless abandon.

"Aaaa—haaa—eee—aaahh!"

Her bloodcurdling Tarzan yell split the night like the cry of a banshee as she became a human cannonball and sailed through the sky. The startled stranger whirled around, and her feet hit him in the chest with a resounding thud. His flashlight sailed into the trees behind them, and the gun spurted across the path and into the darkness. By the time she skidded to a stop, she'd pinned the gun-toting man to the ground, slamming his head against a tree trunk on the way down.

"Run, Fred. I've got him!"

Adam gasped for breath and shook his head, trying to fight off the effects of the crash. A woman! The kamikaze pilot who'd kayoed him from the heavens was a woman, a petite and—from the feel of her as she struggled to get a grip on him—generously equipped female. She smelled like honeysuckle. No, he was spacey from hitting his head. The woods smelled like honeysuckle. The woman smelled like lumber and pine tar. And she lay pressed against him.

"Freeze!" she ordered, lifting her weight onto her arms so that she could get a good look at him. "Don't move a muscle!"

Under normal conditions Adam knew he would already have thrown her off and had her pinned in a death grip. He must still be a little stunned. And when she lifted her head, allowing the light from the streetlamp along the path to illuminate her face, he knew he was in trouble.

Noting the man's dazed expression, Toni temporarily forgot about protecting Fred, transferring her concern to the man beneath her.

"Are you hurt?" she asked worriedly.

Was he hurt? Flat on his back in a wooded area not three miles from the Atlanta Police Department, Adam "Ironman" Ware, tough guy, ex-receiver for the New Orleans

Saints, was being held captive by the most angelic creature who'd ever jumped on his body. Hurt? No. Astounded? Yes. He studied her sternly.

There was a leaf caught in the cap of soft blond hair that crowned her heart-shaped face. Incredibly big blue-green eyes flashed with the kind of vitality that a photographer searching for a lively model would kill for. In the recesses of his trained memory, a fleeting recognition hovered. He'd seen this woman before, not on the streets or in the mug books. He couldn't bring a name to mind, but he knew this arrest was going bad.

"Hey!" Toni yelled. "Fudge! Gosh! 'Hey, diddle diddle. The cat and the fiddle.' Answer me, turkey. Are you okay?"

Adam sighed, staring up at his attacker in resigned fascination. Even in the moonlight he could see genuine concern in the deepening blue of her eyes and the wrinkle in her brow.

"I don't know," he said ruefully. "I seem to be hallucinating. I think I'm being molested by an angel who's reciting nursery rhymes. Is she real?" He shifted his body in a tentative, examining move. "Nah! It must be a lovely dream."

"I'm real. And I'm not reciting nursery rhymes for you. I substitute nursery rhymes for curse words. I'm trying to quit. I asked if you're all right." she repeated crisply.

Even though the man beneath her might have hit his head and might not know what he was doing, Toni couldn't afford to take any chances. He was too big and too strong. Fred and the others were her responsibility. They had to come first. Once she was certain they were safe, she'd deal with any injury she may have caused the stranger.

"I don't know," he said. "Do I feel all right to you?"

He was teasing her. In a swift move that she knew surprised him, she caught his wrists and twisted them above his head. She might be small, but she was trained in self-defense.

Big mistake, Toni, she thought instantly. The move mashed her breasts against his collarbone. Her mouth was in kissing distance of a man who looked like the answer to every woman's most erotic fantasy. With dark, smoldering good looks, the stranger could have been Mel Gibson's brother. Intense black eyes seemed to emanate liquid heat. His full lips parted in an invitation to be kissed.

"Don't move a muscle," she said desperately.

"Believe me, Jungle Girl, I wouldn't move a muscle if I could help it. Unfortunately ..." His voice trailed off and he crooked one eyebrow. Both of them felt at least one of his more obvious muscles stubbornly refusing to obey her order.

Toni thought quickly, shifted her knee along the inside of his thigh to the spot where she judged she could do the most damage, and lifted her own questioning eyebrow. The "hickory, dickory, doc" was only half under her breath. "I think you ought to know that I can protect myself. Want a demonstration?"

"Okay, okay. I surrender." He bit back a smile of admiration that he suspected bordered on some crazy kind of infatuation. She was brave, this renegade, brave and smart. And she'd thrown him totally off balance. He never teased. He never allowed his personal feelings to color his responses. Or at least he never had before.

Adam was a methodical man who followed police procedure to the letter. Now the

Ironman had suddenly turned into clay and he wasn't quite sure how it had happened. For the moment he would let her call the shots. He'd been outmaneuvered and he was forced to admit that the woman intrigued him.

When the mayor had personally asked him to look into the mugging of the elderly in the park, he'd had no idea what he was getting into. He soon learned that someone was approaching the victims and getting their attention, while a second mugger ran by, grabbing their purses or wallets and disappearing into the trees. The elderly people weren't hurt, although they were badly frightened. The police had been unable to stop the criminals.

Then, in the last week, a pair of modern-day vigilantes had stepped in and saved at least three potential victims from being robbed. The rescue team consisted of a large man disguised as a bum and a boy dressed all in black. Having their job done for them was embarrassing for the police department. On his own, Adam had staked out the area for three nights with no results—until now.

He swallowed hard and let his imagination fill in the blanks in this exercise. The woman who'd captured him was either one of the muggers or one of the vigilantes. Knowing Fred's arrest sheet, he opted to go for the criminal version. Yet she didn't sound like a crook. No, those eyes and that face couldn't belong to anybody with criminal inclinations. She was a female Robin Hood with a band of merry men. Now that she'd captured him, he'd join her band and fight the leader for her favors. He'd ... He was definitely hallucinating.

Except for the slow, constant pulse of desire throbbing insistently between them, he would have thought he'd fallen asleep on a stakeout and this was all an erotic dream. This was no dream, though. He was being manhandled by an angel.

Toni refused to acknowledge the hardness pressing against the lower part of her body. She refused to acknowledge the odd sensations playing hide-and-seek just beneath her skin. She and the man were practically nose to nose, only a breath away from joining their lips.

Trying to support her weight on her arms so that she could move away from his disturbing nearness, she lost her grip on his wrists and pressed her hips against an erection that seemed enormous.

Getting herself into unorthodox dilemmas was nothing new to Toni Gresham. Her philosophy had long been that those who don't make mistakes, don't do anything. And one way or another, she usually managed to make things right. This time she might be in a no-win situation. Still, the longer she delayed, the better chance Fred had of escaping. She wasn't at all sure about herself.

The man lay motionless, watching her with an expression of amusement. They were at a standoff and they both knew it. She guessed he was waiting for her to make a move and she hadn't a clue what she should do next. Outside of an irrational urge to press her mouth against the mystery man's, she couldn't seem to focus on any reasonable means of escape.

"Are we finished playing cops and robbers?" she finally asked, narrowing her eyes and pursing her lips primly.



“Cops and robbers? Oh, I thought we were playing Tarzan and Jane, the law of the jungle,” he said, grinning lazily. “But I guess I ought to tell you that I really am the law and you’re under arrest. Anything you say or do may be held against you in a court of law and—”

A crashing in the brush and the thud of footsteps announced that they were no longer alone.

“Hold on, dude, now listen here. The little lady’s got no fear. But Fred has your gun, doncha know. And Dead Fred says, let—the—lady—go!”

“What are you doing, Fred, threatening a police officer? Aren’t you in enough trouble? Anyway, I know you don’t have my gun, so quit bluffing.”

“Fred. Get out of here,” Toni called over her shoulder. “Please! I’m in charge. I have connections down at city hall. Believe me, I have everything under control.” She pressed her knee threateningly against the stranger’s erection. “Don’t I, Officer?”

“That could be debated, but I don’t think I’d care to argue just now,” he drawled, shifting his lower body. “Actually, if you’re in charge, outlaw, you’re the one I want.”

“I’m in charge.”

“And do I understand that you’re obligating yourself to handle any problem you’re responsible for?”

“Eh ... yes.” Toni was beginning to realize that the stranger’s play on words might not be unintentional.

“What about your car?” Fred asked stubbornly.

Toni groaned. Fred was going to be difficult. “Take it. Drive the others home. I’ll catch a cab.”

“Unless you’d like to join us down at headquarters,” Adam suggested to the man who appeared unwilling to leave his boss.

“Stop worrying, Fred. My father will handle this. Get away from here—now!”

Fred hooked his thumbs in his suspenders with an exaggerated show of being cool. He might have fooled the man beneath her, but Toni knew he was holding onto his control with a thread.

“All right, Toni,” he finally agreed. “If you’re sure. But he’d better not hurt you, or I’ll —”

“I’m sure, Fred. Explain what happened to the others and don’t let them come back to the park until I say so. I’ll be home as soon as I can.” She watched his gaze shift from herself to the police officer several times before he reluctantly moved off into the darkness. The crunch of his footsteps died away and they were alone again.

“You’ll join him tomorrow, maybe,” Adam announced, “if you cooperate and the chief is lenient. Tonight, lady, you’re mine.” With absolute ease he pulled his wrists from her grip and looped his arms around her waist, waiting for her to comprehend that she was no longer in control.

“Chief? You’re not going to arrest me, are you?”

“Yep. I’m afraid I’m going to have to take you in. In cop talk, outlaw, you’re my prisoner.”

For a second Toni allowed herself to face the truth. She’d known from the beginning

that there was a possibility they'd be caught. The newspapers had printed the warning that the mayor was cracking down on muggers in the park. But the elderly people living in the nearby Swan Gardens apartments hadn't seen any results. Granted, there might be better solutions for handling the muggers than the one she and Fred had come up with, but she hadn't found any yet. All she was trying to do was make it possible for those dear old people to get outside their apartments.

Now a lone-wolf lawman had come along, and instead of arresting the muggers, he'd arrested the only person trying to run the criminals out of the park.

"You're crazy," she said. "You don't really want to arrest me. I think you must have suffered a concussion when you hit your head. Maybe we'd better get you to the hospital and have you checked out."

He sighed. "You're right, outlaw. We ought to get moving. This ground is hard and the night is fleeting, and we have miles to go before we sleep."

He was quoting Robert Frost, she thought. A man who quoted Robert Frost couldn't be all bad. Maybe he was going to let her go. Sure, and maybe those whales would rather buy skates and take up ice dancing.

A cloud slipped in front of the man, and the shadows crept inward, circling the area where they lay with darkness. Insect noises and bird calls were filling the silence with their eerie night sounds. Toni shivered. This whole peculiar situation was something they hadn't covered in either her engineering training or her self-defense classes.

"There's just one little thing," he said, tightening his hold on her waist. "About taking care of the problems you've caused."

Toni gulped. The man was serious. She'd sent Fred and the others away to keep them safe. Now, who was going to keep her safe? "Problem? Eh, yes," she stammered. "I think the solution is a—a cold shower and a warm brandy. Yes, that ought to do it."

He raised his brows. "I was referring to the fact that you're a criminal and you're under arrest, babe. What problem did you think I was talking about?"

Adam couldn't believe what he was saying. He was teasing her, delaying the carrying out of his duty. He didn't know why he was still lying on the ground like some star-struck adolescent making out with his first girl. He certainly didn't know why his hands were caressing her hips.

"Don't call me babe. My name is Toni, and I'd like to get up now."

"Tony? As in Tony the tiger? I never had anybody like you in my cereal box as a kid." He could feel her breasts moving against him in short, quick thrusts as she breathed. She was inviting. Her eyes flashing half in fear, half in anger, her body pressed snugly against him. Damn! The thoughts he was having were definitely against police procedure.

She licked her lips nervously and his admiration for her grew. Afraid? Yes, but she wasn't going to give an inch. She certainly was intriguing and he hadn't met many women that interested him. He never allowed himself that kind of distraction. What would she do if he kissed her? As soon as he considered doing it, he knew he wanted to kiss her, wanted to press his mouth against those soft, trembling lips. He must be crazy. He was a police officer. He couldn't kiss a woman and then arrest her.

Toni felt a sudden tension in the man beneath her. As his eyes seemed to probe hers, waves of confusion swept over her. Her body began to quiver, and she knew he felt it too. What was happening to her? She was lying on top of a stranger in the woods, alone, and, she hated to admit it, aroused. The truth was, she wanted to touch those sensual lips, taste the mouth that seemed to be moving closer, slide her hands up inside his T-shirt.

“All right, Sergeant Friday,” she blurted out, “I’m your prisoner. I confess to all charges. I’m responsible for the Peachtree Vigilantes. I’ll tell you our MO. We sweep into an area and roust out the bad guys and make the parks safe for America. If safety is a crime, arrest me.” She slid one knee to the ground and made a motion to rise.

“Oh, don’t worry, outlaw, I intend to.”

She looked back at him and caught her breath. The moon had come out from behind the cloud, throwing jigsaw pieces of light across the path. She could see that the man had the most incredibly piercing eyes, dark, dark eyes that sizzled with intensity. The blood dropped from her head like mercury in a thermometer plunged into icy water, leaving her dizzy with the sure knowledge of what was about to happen.

“Why arrest me?” she asked, delaying the inevitable. “I’m not the criminal.”

He slid one hand up her spine to her neck, capping the back of her head and nudging her down. “I don’t know what you are.”

“I’m just a woman, a woman who’s in over her head. Please—please, don’t kiss me.” She hadn’t meant to sound so breathless. She’d meant her words to be a protest, a reprimand, a refusal. They weren’t. “ ‘Lucy Locket lost her pocket’ ... I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. What I meant was—”

“What you meant was that you want to be kissed. You’re an open book, and I can’t seem to stop myself from reading your secrets.” It was true, he thought. But what was even truer was that it took every ounce of control he had to stifle the compelling urge to kiss her. She was too close, too inviting, too beautiful. He raised his head.

Toni didn’t think she’d relaxed her neck muscles. She didn’t think she’d met his lips halfway. In her mind she’d braced herself against his attack, an attack that didn’t come. Instead, she lowered her head, brushing her lips against his, and felt his tentative refusal. She didn’t know at what point the kiss changed, but it did, into something soft and warm. Suddenly her hands were in his hair and his fingers were caressing her face.

“Oh, hell, outlaw, now you’ve done it.” Adam stiffened and tried to break the bemused spell her kiss had woven. He looked dazedly into her dreamy eyes. “We can’t do this. It’s —”

“Wonderful,” she finished. “Wonderful.”

“It’s unprofessional.” He pulled her against him and rolled over, pinning her easily beneath him.

“What are you doing?”

“Arresting you, darling, before I completely forget my duty. It’s not going to work. I don’t influence easily and I can’t be bought.” He stood, then took her by the hands and pulled her to her feet.

As she swayed momentarily, he curbed his desire to slide his hands beneath her

oversize T-shirt and touch the nipple puckering against the soft cotton. She was dewy-eyed and unsteady on her feet. He knew that if he didn't jerk her back to the present, he'd lose the last thread of his control.

"Let's go, outlaw," he muttered, more as a growl than a command.

She'd been wrong, Toni thought. He wasn't Mel Gibson. Mel Gibson was a smiling imitation of the man standing before her. Graceful, thick eyebrows arched over dark eyes, serious now with the return of reason. His jaw was strong, uncompromising, and he seemed pained, his features drawn into an angry frown. Suddenly he'd become Dirty Harry and she'd turned into Minnie Mouse.

"Go where?" she asked.

"To headquarters, ma'am, to see the chief. He'd like to have a discussion with you, on behalf of His Honor the mayor and the City Council. Afterward we'll probably have a little talk with the judge."

"You're serious, aren't you?" The feel of their kiss was still on her lips and her body was protesting the sudden chill that had rushed over her. It was the night air, she told herself. The day had been a scorcher, but the night had turned cool. She ought to have worn a jacket.

"I'm always serious. Are you cold?"

"No. I mean, yes." It was late August and August in Georgia was hot. There must have been some crazy inversion in the jet stream.

"Here, take my shirt." He started to lift it over his head.

"No. Please, don't take off your clothes. I mean, if we're going somewhere, let's go. I'm just a little nervous. I've never been arrested before." She'd never kissed a strange man in a park before, either.

"Fine. As soon as I retrieve my gun. Come over here." He took her hand and pulled her into a patch of pale moonlight. "Can I trust you not to move? I'd hate to have to handcuff you. I've already broken enough regulations tonight. I guess one more won't matter."

"Of course you can trust me. I'm a very honest person. If you'll let me go, I won't even tell anybody about what happened."

"And *what* won't you tell anybody?"

Her gaze flicked over him. He was at least a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier than she. Everything about his stance dared her to argue.

"Why ... that you kissed me," she retorted with a dare in her voice.

"I see. That's your honest observation of what happened, that I kissed you?"

"Well, not entirely. All right, I'll admit it. I suppose you could say that I kissed you, if I'm being entirely honest."

"I do like an honest woman," Adam said seriously. "I'd like to shake your hand. It is truly remarkable to find a woman who can be trusted."

Any thought of running went straight out of Toni's mind when he took her hand. That warm feeling enveloped her again. The cold was gone but the shivering intensified. How could such a hard man have such warm, gentle lips and hands?

He held her hand for a moment. Then, satisfied that she wouldn't run away, he

released her and turned to look for his weapon.

Toni watched him search. He was an enigma, she mused, the ultimate alpha man. He stood peering into the woods until he spotted the gun, then, reached into the brush to pick it up. This was her chance. In that second before he turned to face her, she shoved him and dashed off into the woods.

Adam swore as he watched her disappear. “So much for honesty, darling.”

He should have never dropped his guard, Adam told himself as he listened to the crackling of underbrush, trying to pinpoint which direction she was headed. From the time he'd started this assignment, he'd known he'd have to act quickly when he found the midnight marauders. He'd followed their trail for three nights, just missing them—until tonight.

Tonight he'd found them and then he'd let their blue-eyed, blond-haired munchkin play Houdini and disappear. But he knew this park and she wouldn't get away. The nearest exit turned her toward downtown and the remains of the old prison farm. He took off after her.

The little thief was faster than he'd expected. After eluding him for several blocks, she turned away from civilization into the only other secluded patch of woods left in a sea of buildings and asphalt. Adam cut through the trees after her.

Even those trees would go soon, he thought as he dodged through them, if Atlanta landed the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. The complex would be built in the adjoining industrial area, turning the old prison farm into prime real estate. Of course that was all speculation. The Olympic site committee wouldn't release their recommendation for months.

Taking off at an angle, he quickened his speed and quickly reached a point where he could block her escape. He had her now. Leaning against a tree, he waited, hearing the crunch of her footsteps come nearer.

Breathless from her mad dash, Toni raced around a tree and ran straight into the arms of the enemy. "Oh, no!"

"What kept you?" He scooped her up in his arms and held her, one hand secure in the bend of her knees and the other pressed against her rib cage. He could feel the thundering of her heart beneath his fingertips.

"Get your big paws off me, Sergeant Friday, or I'll scream loud enough to wake the dead."

"That's about all you'd raise out here, the ghosts in the old prison building up ahead."

"What prison building?"

He tramped through a thick stand of pines into a clearing behind a crumbling, vine-covered building. "This prison building, the old prison farm. They tell me it's haunted, probably by the *dishonest* people."

Toni took a good look at the old structure and shivered. In the moonlight it looked like something that belonged in a nightmare. She expected Freddie to come screaming out of the castlelike building any minute.

With effort she forced her attention away from the building and back to her sanctimonious officer of the law. "There's a difference between someone who commits a crime and someone who ... tells a lie," she said stiffly.

“Not to me. Dishonest is dishonest. People who try to tell themselves otherwise are just lying in a different way.”

“But what about people who have some terrible tragedy befall them and they can’t live up to their obligations? I believe that we’re all our brother’s keepers. It’s up to those who are more fortunate to help those who aren’t.”

“There may be legitimate instances when that happens. But what about those who use those kinds of excuses to get out from under their obligations? They always manage to find some bleeding heart like you to come along and help them wallow in their misfortune. No way, babe, I won’t buy it. There’s help out there, if a man wants it.”

“It must be easy to have everything all black and white. Don’t you ever have areas of gray in your life?”

“No way. A thing is either right or wrong, good or bad, honest or dishonest. I keep things simple.”

“So you think I belong in a place like this? Is that the way you keep things simple?”

When she looked up at him, he was singed by the heat of the anger seething in her eyes. He hadn’t intended to deliver a sermon on his personal beliefs. He never talked philosophy with the criminals he arrested. He never let them kiss him either. But this woman was different. Without knowing she’d done so, she’d touched the part of him he kept most private.

“No, you don’t belong here,” he said. “Where you belong is at headquarters, right away.”

“No, where I belong is on the ground. I’m perfectly capable of walking. I won’t try to get away again.”

“More honesty?”

“I can’t blame you for that. I guess you don’t have much reason to trust me, do you?”

“It isn’t that exactly,” he admitted. “If we’re being honest, I’ll have to admit that you scare me. You’re dangerous. Holding you is like holding a bomb that’s ready to explode any minute. The feeling is very stimulating.”

Stimulating, she thought. Lordy, she knew what this man felt like when he was stimulated. She could recognize the feeling very well. The last thing she wanted right then was to face the kind of honesty he was giving her. Everything about this night was irrational. Change the subject, Toni, she implored herself.

She bit back a real swear word. She had to stop swearing, either the real thing or her silly nursery-rhyme substitutions. He read her too well. No sense in giving him any more clues to the anxiety attack he was responsible for.

“Eh ... I’ve never seen this building before. Was it really a prison farm? I can’t believe it’s sitting right here so close to the downtown area and I’ve never seen it. How’d you find it?”

Adam gave a deep sigh of relief, welcoming the new direction of her conversation. “This is where I left my bike when I went looking for you and your friend tonight. I’ve known about the place for ... years.” He didn’t have to tell her that every police officer knew about the prison. And every punk drug dealer as well. It was a popular place for drug deals and other clandestine operations.

“At the time they built it, it wasn’t downtown,” he explained. “It was a farm where they raised the food that they used to feed all the prisoners. It dates back to sometime after the War Between the States. It’s been condemned for years.”

To Toni the building was wicked looking. It wasn’t that big, but its rock turrets and thick stone walls were formidable. Bars still covered the windows. The moonlight cast ominous shadows across the Gothic structure, giving it an eerie atmosphere. Unconsciously she snuggled closer and dropped her voice to a whisper. “It is pretty spooky looking.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of an old deserted building?”

“Of course not,” she declared with more confidence than she felt. “Will you put me down?”

“Are you sure you want me to?”

Toni wasn’t at all sure she wanted him to release her. But any other answer would lessen her bravado. “Of course I do. I’m your prisoner. I won’t try to run away again.”

“Oh, yes. I forgot. The words of an honest woman, no doubt, an honest liberated woman who hides out in the darkness, putting innocent people at physical risk.”

“I am not a crook. I’ve simply been doing your job, protecting the elderly from the muggers.”

“Sure you have. What did you intend to do if one of those muggers came armed as I did tonight? Scream him to death? Get real, lady. If you’re some angel of mercy, you’re playing a dangerous game. Is this how you get your jollies?” He lowered her feet to the ground and released her upper body.

“Spoken like a man who’s sworn to aid and protect the public. Boy, you must be a real compassionate man, Officer. Don’t you ever help people without worrying about a reason for doing it?”

“I do my job. Otherwise, I believe in a man’s being responsible for his own actions. The more do-gooders do, the less irresponsible people have to do.”

He walked to a clump of trees and wheeled a shiny, powerful motorcycle out of them. “Put this on,” he said, handing Toni a black helmet. “You sit behind and hold on to me,” he added as he strapped a matching helmet on his own head.

“I do not intend to ride on that—that thing.”

“Suit yourself, but I think it’s going to be a little difficult for you to keep up on foot. Unless you’d rather I handcuffed you to the building while I call for a black and white.”

Adam knew he was being too harsh with the woman. But it was either be stern or admit that she’d gotten to him. Even now, he was drawn to her in a way he didn’t understand.

Toni took one look at the building and decided that riding was unequivocally better than waiting for more formal transportation. “I’ll ride.” She fastened the helmet on her head and climbed on the cycle.

“I thought you would.”

The machine roared into life, and like a phantom from some gothic novel, they moved through the moonlit courtyard and onto a small road bumpy with broken pavement.

“Why isn’t it being used?” Toni yelled. The wind caught her voice and hurled it behind



them.

Adam turned his head and lifted his helmet so that he could hear. "What?"

Toni slid off her own helmet and leaned forward to speak into his ear. She could feel the rough stubble of his beard on her cheek. "I said, why isn't it being used?"

"It was retired in the late forties when the new jail was built, and then condemned. The city still owns it, but they can't agree on what to do with it, and the historical society won't let them tear it down. One group wants the property zoned industrial. Another wants to make a halfway house out of it. So far nobody has managed to get a majority of support."

He stopped at the corner. Beyond was a familiar, well-lit downtown street.

Toni breathed a sigh of relief. "Where are you taking me, Officer.... Just who are you?"

"I'm sorry. I guess I didn't tell you my name, did I. I'm Captain Ware, Adam Ware, of the special investigative force attached to the mayor's office. And we're going to headquarters."

"Oh, dear. I'm being arrested by an officer who really is an officer. Nothing but the best for the Peachtree Vigilantes."

Reaching behind him, he shoved her helmet back on her head and let his own drop back into place. The motorcycle took off again. In a matter of minutes they were pulling into the parking lot at the Atlanta Police Department. Adam wheeled the motorcycle into one of the slots marked for official use only and shut off the engine. Turning, he removed both his helmet and Toni's.

"Now do you believe that I'm an officer of the law?"

"I never doubted it for a moment. Are you going to put handcuffs on me?"

"Do I need to? No, don't answer that. I think I'd better." He snapped the silver bracelets around her wrists, then started to lead her around the building, away from the public entrance. He momentarily considered letting her go. After this she'd have a record and he hated to be the one to do that to her future.

"Is this the way you usually restrain your women?" she asked.

Adam stopped and whirled her around in front of him. They were standing at the secluded back entrance used for the transfer of hard-core prisoners. He didn't know why he'd come in this way. Perhaps unconsciously he wanted to protect her from any reporters inside.

"I usually don't have to restrain my women. They tend to come willingly. If not, then I have my methods of gaining their cooperation. What about it, outlaw? Are you going to cooperate when we get inside, or do I turn you over to the press?"

They weren't talking about prisoners now and both of them knew it.

"I'll cooperate," she said, "but I'm not an outlaw. My name is Toni, as in Antoinette, Marie Antoinette. And honestly, I've never been so scared in my life. Do you behead your prisoners?"

He looked genuinely shocked. "You're scared of me?"

She was silent for a long moment. "No," she admitted with a gulp, taking a step back. "I'm scared of me." She hit her heel on the edge of the step and stumbled, clutching at

his shoulder to keep from falling.

He reached for her automatically, pulling her out of the light of the doorway and into his arms. "So am I," he muttered under his breath.

"Please, let me finish. This is important."

"I'm not stopping you, Marie Antoinette." He dropped his arms and stepped back.

"Yes, you are. I can't think when you're touching me, and I don't want to feel like that. You're the kind of man I don't like, Captain Ware, a man absolutely convinced that his way is the only way. You see, I believe that every person is a part of humankind, in the truest sense of the word."

"So do I," he argued, "otherwise I'd never be a police officer. The law protects the innocent and punishes the guilty—no exceptions."

"And you obey the law?"

"Of course. I uphold the law. I'm good at what I do. That's why no matter what I'd rather do, I have to arrest you."

She gazed at him sadly. "And that's the problem, Captain Ware. Not your arresting me. It's the no exceptions, everything clearly black and white. But you know what happens when you mix black and white? You'd better take me to your superior, Captain Ware, before you take a chance and find out."

"You don't look like a hooker," said the pasty-faced, elderly woman who was sharing the cell with Toni.

"Shut up, Annie," a voice admonished from an upper bunk. "I'm trying to sleep."

"That must be a novelty for you, sweet meat, sleeping at night," a man called from the jailer's station farther down the corridor.

"And you're not drunk," Annie went on. "What they got you in the tank for?"

During the last hour Toni Gresham had been booked as a suspected mugger, fingerprinted, photographed, and put into a cell. She could have contacted her family, as she'd told Fred she would do, but they would be horrified. They had tried to understand when she selected engineering instead of liberal arts, when she wanted to teach in vocational school instead of a private institution. But her work with the elderly had stretched her relationship with them to the breaking point, and this episode would push it into oblivion.

Toni had gotten herself in jail and she'd get herself out. The officer who'd led her to her cell explained that once she'd seen the judge, she could make bail and be out by morning. In the meantime, she was stuck in the holding tank. She sat in a half-dark cell with two other women. She had never been so uneasy in her life. She told herself that being caught unnerved her, not the man who had caught her. She was lying.

"Why was I arrested?" she said to the woman named Annie. "I ... because I'm with a group called the Peachtree Vigilantes. We've been patrolling the city parks, trying to discourage muggers. Tonight we—I got caught."

"Oh, yeah!" Annie pulled herself to her feet and strode across the tiny cell to the cot where Toni sat, as though she needed to verify with her eyes what Toni had said.

Recognition sifted through Annie's rheumy eyes. "I heard of you. You're that friend of Dead Fred's."

"You know Fred?" Toni felt better. The experience of being arrested was more disturbing than she'd imagined. Not only was the jail block dark, it smelled bad. But Annie's knowing Fred took the edge off the strangeness.

"Lord, hon, Fred's one of us. Least he was before he went to work over at the Swan apartments. I never thought I'd see the day that Dead Fred turned respectable, but he ran into some woman who got him a job as a janitor and turned him around. Say ... that was you, weren't it?"

"If you mean am I the one who got Fred a job, the answer is yes. I'm Toni Gresham." Toni held out her hand and waited while the old woman stared at her in confusion.

"Pleased to meet you, Toni." Annie wiped her hand on her soiled skirt before taking Toni's in a sturdy handshake. "I'm Annie. The street folks call me Omni Annie, on account of I hang around the Omni Center when there's a basketball game or a concert. That's my territory," she boasted.

"Better be careful, little lady," the same male voice warned. "You shake Annie's hand and you'll draw back missing a finger."

"Don't pay any attention to him. I don't break the law. They just pick old Annie up occasionally to make the mayor happy. Say, I've heard about you helping out all those old folks. You're the one who sends those kids over to put new locks on the doors, fix the plumbing and things when they need 'um?"

"That's me."

"Who got you?" Annie hung on to the edge of Toni's bunk and peered at her in the darkness. "Who arrested you?"

"I believe his name was Captain Ware."

"Uh-oh! Adam got you, huh? Tough. He's honest, don't cut no slack for nobody. Hey." She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You got no business being one of that gang. You're too young to risk your life, even if you are after the bad guys. You ought to be going to parties and having fun."

Toni bristled. "We're not all that young. I'm twenty-six. The Peachtree Vigilantes range from eighteen to eighty. But only Fred and I have taken up park patrol. Besides, what does age have to do with helping your fellow man? Something needs to be done. I'm doing what I can for those who need help."

"That's what I keep trying to tell them too, honey," the unseen occupant of the top bunk said with a dry laugh. "They didn't buy my story either."

Annie gave a little snort. "So why'd they arrest you, Toni?"

"Aside from Captain Ware's thinking that I'm one of the bad guys, it seems to be against the law for a regular citizen to try to uphold the law when the legally sworn officers don't. My whistle was a potentially dangerous weapon."

"Too bad they sent Adam after you. You might have outsmarted any of those other blue shirts. Guess you'll have to stop now, won't you?"

"Don't bet on it. I don't intend to stop as long as the muggers don't. Those elderly Swan Gardensapartment residents have been using that little park all their lives. They

aren't going to have to give it up if I can prevent it."

"Yeah, there was a time when I used that park myself," Annie said softly, then added, "You got a good helper in Fred. I'm glad you got him off the street."

"Have you known Fred for a long time?"

"Guess I know Fred as good as anybody," Annie said proudly. "We go back a ways, before he took his fall."

"Will you two pipe down," the third cell member said, covering her head with her pillow. "I told you I'm trying to catch some z's before my old man gets me out of here."

Annie glanced at the woman and frowned. "You'd better hope he leaves you here, 'cause if he don't, sooner or later you'll be sleeping somewhere—permanently."

"Tell me about Fred," Toni whispered, shifting her weight to allow the old woman to sit down beside her. "Why do you call him Dead Fred?"

Annie looked confused for a moment before accepting Toni's invitation. "Well, he never was any good at keeping a job. He came up with the idea of taking a fall in front of a cab so he could collect money from the insurance company."

"Fred? He faked an injury?"

"Nah." Annie laughed. "Before he could try it he got in a real three-car accident and was knocked out cold. In the hullabaloo that followed, he got loaded into the wrong ambulance and was carted off to the morgue. When he came to, if he hadn't a thought he was already dead, it would have scared him to death. He took off and they never did know what happened to the body."

Toni laughed out loud. "Dead Fred. Beautiful!" She laughed again. "And Captain Ware?" She hesitated. "He seemed pretty bitter. Have you known him long?"

"Adam? Sure. We used to watch him on the television when he played football. He was something to see, catching that ball and running down the field, until he got hurt. Some maniac clothes-lined his head and turned him a different direction from his legs and he quit."

"A professional football player?" He was tall, and her rather intimate examination of his body had revealed he was built for quick moves. But there was something else about him, something hidden and held back, a force to be reckoned with in the height of battle. A conquistador, a bull-fighter, a commando, he might be, but never a man behind a desk.

"Still holds the running record for the Saints, our Adam does. Comes in handy when he takes out after one of those kids. He can still keep up with most of 'em."

He'd certainly kept up with her, Toni thought ruefully. "Is he ... married?"

"Adam?" Annie laughed. "Wish he was. Don't even have a woman so far as I know. Avoids them. Never gets close to anybody that I know of. Normal, the man isn't. But then, the women he comes in contact with mostly ain't exactly the marrying kind."

"Doesn't he have any personal life?" Toni didn't know why she was asking so many questions about Captain Ware. If she never saw the man again, it would be too soon for her.

"Sure. In his time off he works with the boys down at the Boys' Club. Coaches every sport they play. The chief keeps trying to send him on some of them plush uptown

plainclothes assignments, you know, like guarding out-of-town big wheels. But Adam won't go. You're the first high-type woman he's come in contact with. You interested?"

"Me? Don't be silly. I don't have time for men and Adam Ware is the last man I'd ever be interested in. He's much too—too powerful. I don't think I'd want to be the one who ...” She stopped short. The one who what?

A picture of Adam Ware flashed into her mind, dark hair ruffled, green camouflage pants snug across massive thighs, a sensual, daring smile. Thinking of the man would never do. Visualizing him as some wild commando made her heart race. He represented complacency, the enemy. Her mind knew it, even if her body didn't.

The woman on the top bunk lifted her pillow from her head. “I don't know, hon. There's lots of women who think he might be worth it. Our Adam don't fool around. He's straight as an arrow. Believe me,” she added, sounding disappointed, “we've all tried, so don't waste your time.”

“I don't intend to,” Toni said sharply, pushing the man's insistent image from her mind. “Tell me about you, Annie.”

Annie's face went stiff and she pulled herself to her feet. “Nothing special bout me. There's a thousand folks in this place with blank faces. I'm just one of them. Maybe sometime ...”

A clatter interrupted her as a uniformed officer pulled out a ring of keys and opened the cell door.

“All right, Ms. Gresham, you're out of here.”

“You mean I don't have to see the judge?”

“You're free to go.”

“Fine, Officer, I'd like to make arrangements for my friend, Annie, also.”

“Omni Annie? You don't want to put Annie back on the street. In here she at least has a bed and we'll give her breakfast in the morning before she leaves.”

“I'm not going to put her on the street. I'll take her home with me.”

“No, ma'am. I don't think that's a good idea. Maybe you'd better have a talk with Captain Ware about that.”

Talking with Captain Ware was the last thing Toni wanted to do. Maybe later, after she'd had time to analyze what had happened, after her nerve endings had settled down.

“Thanks, Toni,” Annie said, “but I'd better just stay here.” She clasped Toni's hand and gave her a sad smile.

Annie's acceptance of the officer's comment was all it took. Toni would face Captain Ware again, even if the thought of seeing that dark stranger again made her heart beat so hard, her rib cage hurt.

“All right, take me to the Captain.”

In spite of her brave protests to Annie, Toni knew that the world thought she was too young and too idealistic. Her Pollyanna attitude was only her way of coping, though. Despite her whimsical approach to life, there were times she was just plain scared. But running scared didn't change anything. Being optimistic was her shield against the naysayers.

It only took a trip over to the Swan Gardens apartments to see what despair and neglect did to the elderly. The people who lived there had been proud, once. But their apartment house was no longer in the best section of town, and the owners had better places to spend their money. Pride could only be stretched so far.

The director of the Atlanta vocational school where Toni taught knew he was lucky to get someone with her engineering background for what he could pay. In return, he reluctantly allowed Toni to assign her students real construction work as a hands-on learning experience. But what they were able to do for the Swan residents was only a drop in the bucket.

Toni knew what they did was temporary, but it was doing something. The Peachtree Vigilantes were another temporary fix, born of desperate need and Toni's determination. Except, Captain Ware had been right. It could be dangerous. It might be all right for her and Fred to take chances. But the backup team that came charging in after they had cornered the muggers was made up of the elderly residents who insisted on helping. Injury was a real threat. There would be no more vigilantes.

Adam watched the heads turn as Toni Gresham followed a uniformed policeman through the squad room, heading toward his office. Hell, what was she doing there? Even wearing dirty jeans and a T-shirt, she obviously didn't belong with the late-night crowd waiting for processing.

He saw her lift her chin, allowing her guarded gaze to survey the cross section of humanity being interviewed by individual officers at scarred green metal desks. Even he recognized the hopelessness in the eyes of the prisoners slouched in a row of old school desks lined up against the wall. But Toni seemed to shore up her courage with every step she took.

He flexed his right arm and grimaced. She might be small, but she packed a real wallop. He was glad he'd been alone on his mission. Being knocked to the ground by a female Tarzan with golden curls wasn't something he'd care to have widely known.

Adam bit back a smile. She'd done something that nobody else had done for a while. She'd distracted him enough to allow the rest of her gang to get away. Distracted, hell. She had reached down into his gut and fired up a part of himself that he thought had permanently atrophied. Even now he felt a quickening at the thought of her breasts pressed against his chest. And he'd kissed her. He didn't even want to think about that. Damn! Why couldn't she have just called a cab and gone straight on home?

Toni saw the strain in Adam Ware's face as she stepped hesitantly inside the glass-enclosed cubicle that served as his office. He was still wearing fatigues. The sweatband was gone, and his dark hair was tousled wildly across his forehead. He had a heavy five-o'clock shadow. The deep creases in his forehead and at the corners of his mouth told her his frown wasn't newly acquired for her. Perhaps her insistence on talking to him was doomed to failure, but when had that ever stopped her?

Sitting in the darkened cell, she'd convinced herself that what had happened between them had simply been a bad case of a hormonal response induced by fear. She'd been infected with the Stockholm syndrome, the one that made a victim attracted to her captor. She couldn't be interested in a man who saw the world only in terms of black and white.

She was wrong. Adam Ware was still the sexiest man she'd ever seen. He was the irresistible neighborhood bad boy, the forbidden shadow man whose kisses were deliciously wicked in the late-night fantasies that had invaded her dreams more often recently. She'd thought such men existed only in the imagination. She'd been wrong about that too. Adam Ware was real.

Shades of *West Side Story*, she thought, and shook herself mentally. She was there to get Annie out of jail, not play fantasy games about the man behind the desk.

"Thank you, Officer Smith," Adam said to the man who'd escorted Toni. "You needn't wait."

Adam watched his subordinate nod and back out of the office, closing the door. Why hadn't he asked Smith to wait? Another presence would make an exchange less threatening. This woman confused him and that was the danger he had to face.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Gresham?" His voice sounded stiff and guarded.

"I'd like you to arrange bail for my friend Annie."

"Annie?" He rubbed his eyes wearily, then slid his thumb and forefinger down the sides of his face. They grazed the stubble of whiskers, rasping like sandpaper in the silence.

"I think she's called Omni Annie."

"Why in hell do you want to go bail for Annie? She'll be out of here in the morning anyway—after breakfast."

"I want her out of here tonight. I'll pay her fine."

"Listen, outlaw, Annie isn't really under arrest. We just haul her in several times a week so that she has a safe place to sleep. I'm not turning her out of a bed because of some bleeding heart. Now go home."

"I will, but I'm taking Annie with me. She'll have a bed and breakfast and some clean clothes. The only thing that's going to be bleeding is you, if you call me outlaw again. My name is Antoinette Gresham, Ms. Gresham to you."

Adam reached into his pocket and pulled out a half-smoked, thoroughly chewed stump of a cigar and clamped it between his teeth. He rolled it around for a moment, then removed it, glaring at it with great regret.

"Ms. Gresham, are you threatening a police officer?"

"I think so. In fact, Captain Ware, I'm absolutely positive about the matter. So, either you release Annie or I'll give you a reason to send me back to my cell, a nice vocal, public reason."

He took in her words, even while most of his mind was intent on a minute inventory of her body.

"Consider yourself a physical person, do you, Ms. Gresham?" He stood up and stuck the cigar between his lips again, rolling it around for a moment as if savoring its taste.

"I never thought about being physical before I met you, Captain Ware. Since then I've rarely thought of anything else." Damn, she thought. Open mouth, insert foot.

She didn't know whether it was the cigar or her statement that made him choke, but the cigar disappeared and he began to cough violently. He swallowed the damn thing.

As he tried valiantly to clear his throat Toni stepped swiftly behind him and wrapped her arms around his abdomen. With two quick squeezes she forced enough air from his lungs to pop the cigar stump out. The good captain began to breathe normally. She tried to remove her arms but he grabbed them, holding on as if she were a life jacket and he were drowning.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

"Heimlich maneuver. You were choking on that nasty thing."

He swallowed hard and tried to still his racing heartbeat. "I guess I should say thank you."

"You're welcome, Captain. Now, release me. Everyone out there is looking."



Adam whirled around and gazed down at the woman who'd just performed a lifesaving procedure on a police captain in the middle of the squad room, with every officer in the station looking on. "Does that bother you?" he asked.

He'd moved so quickly, Toni's arms were still looped around him. She felt as if she were back on the motorcycle with the man who'd come crashing into her life with all the grace of the Schlitz Malt Liquor bull.

"Absolutely not," she snapped, taking a step back.

She forced herself to think of Adam Ware as one of her father's executives, wearing a custom-tailored silk suit with a paisley print tie and a soft blue shirt. Making him into a businessman ought to erase the sensual image her mind insisted on replaying. It didn't work. Even a well-disciplined mind rebelled at clothing a man with a body like Adam Ware's. And when had she ever been well disciplined at anything?

She continued to visualize him in formal, executive dress. Her separation ploy might have worked if she hadn't noticed his knee-high black socks and soft black Italian shoes. "Oh, fudge!" In her vivid imagination, the man was perfectly dressed from the waist up. He just wasn't wearing any pants.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Snakes and snails and puppy-dog tails!" she whispered desperately as she backed around the desk for safety. She glanced quickly around. If any of the men in the squad room had been watching, they had averted their eyes from their boss's unprofessional actions.

"More nursery rhymes?" Adam said. "You say you're not an outlaw and I didn't think angels had bad habits."

Toni wearily combed her fingers through her hair. "I'm no angel, and I have as many bad habits as the next person. I don't suppose you have any vices."

"Vices? Oh, yes. I have vices all right. You just saved me from choking on one of them." She had just saved his life, he thought again. He was still holding the cigar stub, and he glared at it. He didn't smoke cigars. He'd stopped long ago. It was just there, a childish panacea he used to distance himself from a situation or a person. He studied the mangled cigar, then threw it into the metal wastepaper can beside the window.

"What about Annie, Captain Ware?"

Adam turned away from the wide-eyed innocence that radiated from Toni Gresham's heart-shaped face and walked to the window. He needed to give himself time to erase the myriad feelings her touch aroused in him.

He wanted to shake her, punish her for what she had done to his peace of mind for the last two hours. When she'd sent word that she wanted to see him, he'd snapped at the sergeant. The last thing he wanted was to see Ms. Toni Gresham again—ever. That's why he'd dropped the charges.

He had been chagrined to find out that the woman he'd arrested was a member of one of Atlanta's wealthiest and most prominent families. But that wasn't enough. She was also well-known for her charity work with the elderly. And standing there, dressed in second-story man black, she was beautiful. He'd told the chief he was willing to let her off with only a warning. The problem was that he'd planned to delay her leaving until

morning and allow the officer of the day to administer the warning.

“Why do you want to take Annie home with you?” he asked her, staring out the window. “You aren’t operating a halfway house illegally on the side, are you?”

“What I am is tired, hungry, and sleepy. What I want to do is get out of here, and if you won’t let Annie come home with me, maybe we’ll both go home with you. That way you could keep us under surveillance.”

She *was* tired, Toni thought. She was talking crazy. The last thing she wanted to do was go home with Captain Adam Ware. He just seemed too tough. She wanted to jar some of that sternness from his demeanor.

“I don’t take *women* home with me. I prefer my ladies one at a time. But if I were to, Toni Gresham, it wouldn’t be for surveillance.” He walked back to the desk and pushed a button on the phone console. “Sergeant Prince, bring Annie from the holding cell and pick up both Annie’s and Ms. Gresham’s personal items.”

“Thank you, Captain Ware,” Toni said softly. “Now, why was I released?”

“We’re dropping the charges, with the stipulation that you stop your clandestine vigilante raiding.”

“I don’t think I can promise that, Captain. But I will promise not to involve anyone else.”

“That’s just about what I thought, Ms. Gresham. Would you like me to call you a cab?”

“Yes, thank you. No, wait. I forgot. I don’t have any money.”

“Wonderful. All right. Let’s go. I’ll drive you.”

“On the motorcycle?”

“No, in my van. Three on a bike is illegal.”

“Of course, and we don’t do anything illegal, do we?”

“Not yet,” Adam said, wondering if mental ravishment was against the law.

They met a confused Annie in the lobby just inside the back door. “Where am I going, Adam?”

“We’re going to a spend-the-night party, Annie. Ms. Gresham has invited both of us.”

“Hot damn! Are we having food?”

“I hope so. I missed supper, playing Tarzan in the woods.”

“That’s another thing I forgot about,” Toni admitted with embarrassment. “I don’t have anything in my refrigerator.”

“I arrest you and agree to turn you loose. Then you remember that you don’t have any money. Now you tell me you don’t have any food for the guest that you insisted I allow to accompany you. Lady, you are some disorganized criminal.”

“You’re right. I’m afraid I didn’t stop to think. Could you lend me ten dollars? I’ll pay you back tomorrow, with interest.”

They looked at each other for a long moment, each considering the wisdom of ever seeing the other again.

“I’ll buy dinner,” Annie said, breaking the tense silence. “Just stop at the all-night market.”

“No way,” Adam snapped. “No telling where you got that money.”

“She doesn’t rob people, does she?” Toni asked under her breath, stepping closer to

Adam to hear his answer. That was a mistake. As soon as their bodies made contact, the spark arced between them. They stared at each other again, wide-eyed in astonishment.

"I don't know," Adam managed to say after a minute. "For all I know she has a million-dollar trust fund somewhere. There's talk that she used to live in one of those fine old apartments on Ponce de Leon, one of those that got torn down years ago."

"Really?" They'd stopped walking just outside the back door. Now they were standing in a patch of darkness, almost as close as they'd been in the woods when she'd kissed him. Her body remembered. Her lips remembered. She swayed toward that memory.

Adam swore. What in hell was happening to him? He didn't know how long they'd been staring at each other. He didn't know how long he'd been fighting his need to sweep her up in his arms and charge through the darkness to the clearing where he'd found her.

Annie's chuckle broke the silence. "Say, I don't mind acting as chaperone, but could you lust after each other someplace else?"

"Shut up, Annie. Get in the van." Adam jerked open the back door of a sleek black vehicle, resplendent with black chrome and a continental kit on which he'd had a gold fleur-de-lis painted.

When Toni made a move to follow her, Annie closed the door in her face. "Better ride up front with the fuzz," she said. "I don't trust the bum."

"Good idea," Toni agreed as she climbed in the passenger side.

"Fasten your safety belt," he directed gruffly.

"I never fasten my safety belt."

"Then we'll just spend the night right here," he said agreeably.

"No way," Annie said. "The back of this thing only has one bed and it's mine. Unless you'd like me to take a powder and leave you two alone."

"Bed? No." Toni grabbed the seat belt and snapped it shut across her chest. "I'm buckled up, Captain."

"Then you *can* follow orders. I was beginning to wonder if you just automatically did the opposite of what you're told."

"Only when the orders are contrary to my instincts."

Instincts? Adam wondered as he backed the van out of the parking area. There'd been no mistaking his instincts when he'd kissed her. The instinct to hold her was as strong now as it had been a few minutes ago, and she hadn't been resisting him then either. This woman was trouble in Atlanta City. With a capital *T* that rhymed with *P* and that stood for pure. This woman was pure trouble any way he went.

"What about law and order?" he bellowed in frustration. "Don't you have any respect for rules?"

"Sure. Rules are wonderful. It's the rule makers that I don't have any respect for. They never take into account the human element. Rules? Sure, but there's never been a rule that hasn't been broken sometime."

"Right. People kill other people. You want us to let them go?"

"Have you ever killed anybody, Captain Ware?"

"Well, yes, but that's different."

“Different? I rest my case.”

“It’s not the same thing and you know it.” He was sorry he’d begun the conversation, sorry he’d arrested the woman, sorry he hadn’t taken her home in the beginning. They might have—

“No,” she said, “it isn’t the same thing. But those same people might have families that need help. Do you want them killed along with the murderer?”

“Of course not. I’m not heartless.”

“But you refuse to let me help protect those who are no longer able to protect themselves?”

“Oh, lady, I can see that this spend-the-night party isn’t going to be gossip and giggles.” He wheeled into an all-night grocery store and killed the engine. “I’ll be right back.”

Toni watched him walk into the store. This time the camouflage suit didn’t disappear. This time his broad shoulders and strong legs were concealed, and the fatigues were more sensual than her imagination could ever have been.

“Like him, do you?”

Annie’s voice broke into her thoughts. For an angry moment Toni had forgotten she was there.

“He’s the most egotistical, irritating man I’ve ever had to deal with. It’s like talking to a stone wall. Doesn’t he ever give in?”

“Not when he thinks he’s right. But don’t give up on him. He needs somebody to stand up to him. A little honest fussing is good for the soul, and it ain’t bad for stimulating the body either. That Adam is some man, ain’t he?”

“I suppose he is, if you’re interested in that sort of thing.”

“And you aren’t?” Annie’s street talk “ain’t” turned into “aren’t” at the same time her voice developed a surprisingly polished modulation.

“Absolutely not. I don’t have time in my life for ... fooling around. That just takes up energy that could be better used somewhere else.”

“Too bad. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen two people sizzle like you two do. Ah, well, Adam would probably be too much of a man for some half-baked society girl to get to anyhow.”

Toni refused to rise to the bait. “Why on earth would anybody want that kind of challenge?”

“Well,” Annie said musingly, “if I understand it right, you’re trying to help the elderly. It wouldn’t hurt your cause any to have somebody like Adam interested in it, purely for ... What’s the term? Humanitarian reasons? I mean, you wouldn’t have to do anything you didn’t want to do.”

“Do you really think Captain Ware would help us?”

“No, but I think Adam isn’t so tough.” Annie’s voice cracked with amusement as she reverted to her normal way of speaking. “The man’s a pussycat, Toni. He just don’t know it. Stroke him right and he’ll purr.”

“He’ll purr?”

“Just a figure of speech, honey. With the right ammunition, the man could be had. Of

course, I wouldn't imagine that you'd ever want to use his influence or do anything underhanded, but it's worth thinking about, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Annie. I don't like being dishonest, even for my people. I'm just not that kind of person."

"You know, that's exactly what I thought. You and Adam, both straitlaced and upright. I wouldn't expect either of you to do anything underhanded. Whatever you feel for each other would have to be above board and open, wouldn't it?"

"Exactly!" Toni said just a little too loudly.

"Then how come you're both hugging them car doors like you're afraid you'll burn each other if you get too close? There's Adam. Looks like we're going to have a big party from those sacks. Can you cook?"

"Eh, not very well."

"That's about what I thought. You can build a house over at that vocational school, but you can't cook a meal. Well, no matter, I'll teach you."

"But Annie, I'm not interested in impressing our illustrious Captain Ware. I—"

The van door swung open.

"I don't know what you can cook," Adam said, "so I played it safe." He slung the bags of groceries behind the seat and climbed in.

"I can cook whatever you have in that bag," Toni said bravely, "and I find it hard to believe that you know anything about playing. As for being safe, forget it."

"I can play any game I want to, outlaw, as long as I know the rules." He slammed the door and started the engine, allowing the vehicle to idle a moment before turning the force of his gaze on her.

"Of course you'd have to have rules, wouldn't you?" she said. "Don't you ever just turn loose and fly with the wind?"

"You mean like a kite broken free of its string? No. Eventually it gets caught by a tree branch or struck by lightning somewhere in some black hole in space."

"Ah, but think of the great wonders it sees, floating free in the heavens. And who knows, it might hang on a star or reach the Milky Way."

They weren't talking about kites, Adam knew as he pulled out into the street. They were talking about taking risks, about pitfalls and rewards, about passion and control. And the wide-eyed woman beside him was shimmering with excitement. He didn't want to recognize the secret arch of response in his own body. He deliberately closed out the wild images flooding his mind. What he was thinking was foolish, and if there was one thing Adam Ware wasn't, it was a fool.

"Where to, madam?" He'd meant to sound like the chauffeur he was pretending to be. Tangled emotions colored his voice, though, and he was sure even Annie knew that the directions he was asking for weren't for driving.

"Out Peachtree to Sherwood Forest, and take a left on Stardust Drive." Toni risked a quick look before she added, "Third drive on the left until it dead-ends."

"You live in a house? I expected a cloud or a tree."

"Well, let's just say you're right on both counts. My friends call my house eccentric. I don't know what you'll think. Appreciation requires a certain amount of imagination."

We'll see."

Shaken by the look glittering in her eyes, he took a long time answering.

"I don't know much about looking at the stars. I suppose I've spent too much time looking at the ground. Maybe that makes me a dull man."

"Ah, Captain Ware, you have more energy than anyone I've met in a long time. You just need to learn how to direct it."

"If I ever want to, I think I may have found the master instructor." He gave her a lazy smile.

One smile and she knew he didn't need to learn anything. He was already directing his energy. He radiated power. The very air around them seemed charged. If they hadn't been enclosed in the van, they might have caused a spontaneous combustion as they gazed at each other. "We'll talk about it later," she said under her breath.

From the back of the van came a mumbled whisper. "Lordy, I hope whatever he's got in that bag isn't burned to a crisp before we get home."

Annie's observation was just a murmur to Adam, a sound he couldn't focus his attention on. It was all he could do to follow Toni's directions to her house. Years of programmed action took over, and he didn't even realize he'd reached the dead end until he saw the house.

"Great guns, what in hell is it? It looks like a giant cup and saucer with legs."

"Oh, you're right." Toni flung herself across the seat and gave him a quick, impulsive hug. "And I thought you had no imagination."

"I think I've just taken one of those unscheduled trips into the Twilight Zone." He opened his door and stepped out onto the neat red-brick drive. "What do you think about this, Annie? You can always go back to jail."

"And miss all this?" Annie crawled out the side door and shook her head in wonder. "I didn't know they taught this kind of building over at that school of yours."

"Anyone can live in a square box, Annie," Toni said. "The idea is to live ... in a magic place. Come on up."

"Will it take off into space when we get inside?" Adam asked, grabbing the grocery bags and following Toni.

She laughed. "The prototype flew, but this one is anchored on the ground."

They mounted a set of narrow steps that took them up past a series of landings to a redwood deck that encircled the entire house. The structure, made of glass and redwood, was shaped like a giant bowl. On one side was a second set of steps that led to the roof. From the distance those steps gave the appearance of a handle on a teacup.

"Are we talking flying saucers here?" Annie asked as Toni led the way into the kitchen. "If so, couldn't we take off from the ground next time?"

"In a manner of speaking," Toni answered. "There is a Russian folk tale about a witch named Baba Yaga. She had a magic cup that flew. I wanted to fly away in a teacup so bad. When I grew up, I wanted a house that soared above the ground, so I built my own teacup. What do you think?"

Adam walked out onto the deck. Over the tops of the trees he could see the nighttime city. He knew about being a child who wanted to fly away from home in a teacup. Toni

was right. She'd created a kind of magic there. And it scared the hell out of him.

She joined him on the deck. "What do you think?"

"I think I must have hit my head harder than I thought. There can't be a magic teacup in the middle of Atlanta. You have to be a figment of my imagination. I'm going to wake up with an awful headache any minute now."

"There's nothing wrong with you that the right food won't fix, Captain," Annie called from the kitchen. "You two come back in here before you go floating off into the night. I don't know nothing about Baba Yaga, but I know when there's magic in the air."

"No thanks, ladies. This has been interesting, but I'll have to pass on the food. I have a busy day tomorrow."

He spoke the lie easily. Tomorrow was his day off, but he needed to get away from Ms. Antoinette Gresham before he acknowledged that her magic was intoxicating. She was leaning against the deck rail, gazing out at the night with a look of wonder on her face. All he wanted to do was pull her into his arms. He was losing it, definitely losing it, and he knew he'd better run.

"Good idea, Captain," she said, glancing over her shoulder at him. "Annie and I have to get an early start too."

"You and Annie? What does that mean?"

She paused, remembering Annie's suggestion about getting Adam on their side. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. And maybe trying to stroke his fur would be fun.

"Well, Captain," she said, "I doubt I could fool you anyway, so I'll just come right out with it. There's a meeting of the Peachtree Vigilantes over at the Swan in the morning. Annie is going with me."

"Dammit, Ms. Gresham." He reached out suddenly and jerked her into his arms. "Haven't you heard anything I've told you tonight? You can't keep breaking the law. Some other officer won't let you off with only a warning."

"I know," she said softly, pressing herself against him. The feel of his hard body confused her for a moment. Instead of remembering her plan to enlist him, she was remembering that too-brief kiss in the park. With effort, she yanked her thoughts back into line. "That's why I'm choosing you to be my consort."

He choked, and this time it wasn't from swallowing his cigar. "Consort?"

"Yes, as in consorting with the enemy. I need a man on the inside."

"Inside?" He was past choking. He was smothering to a delicious death.

"Come by in the morning, Adam, and we'll make our plans."

Dimly he realized that she'd twined her arms around his neck and was tangling her fingers in his hair.

"What are you doing, outlaw?" His voice was tight with emotion.

"I'm stroking your fur, Adam Ware. If I do it right, will you purr?"

Her lips were hot and demanding, and the force of her kiss hit him like a bullet from a .357 Magnum, burning his body with its fire.

"Go home, Adam," she whispered, and pulled herself from his grip. "I ... you still want me to respect you in the morning, don't you?"

"I think I like the idea of us having an 'in the morning,' but respect isn't exactly what

I had in mind.”

“I know.” Toni’s voice was throaty and her mind was muddled with thoughts that had nothing to do with her vigilantes or Annie. Somewhere along the line she’d stopped enticing the man for humanitarian reasons. Except that she was a human being. For a moment she allowed herself to have her own personal human dream about waking up with this man beside her. Yep, an “in the morning” would be wonderful, if it weren’t forbidden.

She forced away those wickedly exquisite thoughts and said the first thing that came into her mind. “By the way, I love your executive socks, Adam, but do put on your pants before you come in the morning.”

She stepped back into the house and closed the door, leaving Adam standing in the saucer, staring stupidly at the house shaped like a teacup.



“Annie, you look wonderful.”

“Yeah, I clean up nice, don’t I? Better get your clothes on. Coffee’s perked and I’ve got biscuits in the oven.”

Toni stood in the kitchen doorway, savoring the warm smells of bread baking and trying to convince herself that the motherly woman in the blue and white gingham dress, with the clean face and neatly combed hair, was the same scruffy character she’d rescued from the holding tank at the jail.

“You look so different,” she said. “Are you certain you’re Omni Annie?” She yawned and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“You mean the clothes? I always keep a real dress and shoes in my bag. Never know when I’ll be invited to a party.” She covered her pleasure with a gruff voice and turned back to the stove. “Fred called. He’s on his way over with bad news.”

“Did he say what?”

“Nope, but he ought to be here in a few minutes.”

The ringing of the doorbell sent Toni scurrying across the great room that was the center of the house and into her bedroom. She wondered what kind of bad news Fred was bringing.

Except for Fred, the identity of her elderly helpers had been protected the night before when they got away. Since she hadn’t been formally charged, Adam had no reason to go after any of them. There was nothing illegal about what her vocational students had been doing to help the Swan residents either. Of course, someone might not think that if they saw the old thread mill complex where they kept their supplies. Everything stored there was legitimate, but it could look suspicious. No doubt about it.

She was just jumpy. Gresham Mills had been closed since the sixties. Nobody knew about that place except her family, and none of them ever went there. Beside, the old mill still belonged to the Gresham family and she was a Gresham. At least her parents had agreed to keep most of the mill complex when her grandfather died, even if they had closed it down. Since she’d inherited an interest, there was nothing illegal about her storing donated building supplies there for use by the students of the Peachtree Vocational School.

Still ... “A tisket, a tasket, a green— Oh!” This time a nursery rhyme didn’t work. “Dammit!” She should have checked in with Fred last night instead of mooning around the house with that police captain on her mind.

Adam Ware. Even his name made her shiver. She blushed as she remembered what had happened on the deck. She’d kissed him, actually kissed him, and she didn’t even want to think about what she’d promised him with that vamp routine.

Toni Gresham, who hadn’t had a truly serious relationship since college, seemed to be infected with a temporary case of moon dust madness. She’d always been accused of

being like her grandfather, living, and breathing her work, and her other causes had always been for someone else. This preoccupation was personal. Even now her pulse quickened at the remembrance of the man with the dark hair and intense frown.

Enough was enough, she told herself. No matter how attractive Adam Ware was, she couldn't allow herself to be distracted. He was an example of the kind of person she most disliked, a man who refused to acknowledge people as individuals. She simply wouldn't see him again. There would be no reason for their paths to cross if she was careful. She'd post a lookout, bribe a mole. There must be somebody in the the police department who could keep her informed of the man's activities. Sure, and maybe the tap-dancing whales would swim down Peachtree Street and picket city hall.

Except—jellybeans! She'd invited him to come back that morning. She must have been out of her mind. He wouldn't come. There was no reason for him to come. They had nothing in common. He'd done his duty and that was that. A police officer and a renegade were incompatible. She'd seen the last of her Mel Gibson look-alike.

Toni took a quick shower and towel-dried her hair, threading her fingers through the thick, short curls as she did every morning. She set her mind on the problems her arrest had caused, resolutely refusing to think anymore about the man who'd arrested her. There was precious little she hadn't already considered about Adam Ware. She'd spent a good portion of the night not thinking about him.

He'd done his job. There was no reason for him to come back there. They weren't interested in each other. They were about as much alike as sun-shine and lightning. It had been Annie who'd suggested that Adam Ware was a pussycat and that she should stroke his fur. Well, if Annie wanted any fur stroked, she'd have to do it herself. Toni had never dealt in favors and she wasn't about to begin now. The last thing she needed was Adam Ware in her life, even if she could convince him to look the other way.

Fortunately she'd decided to take the summer off from teaching. The dean didn't need to know that her latest research project was in law enforcement. That her project was humanitarian rather than educational was her secret—for now. If she ever published her results, it wouldn't be in a technical journal.

She pulled on her usual jeans and gaudy T-shirt, tied the laces on her scruffy Reeboks, and headed back to the kitchen. Fred was there. She heard the murmur of his voice as she walked down the hall. They'd have to lay low for a while, until she could figure out what to do.

"Captain Ware?" He was sitting at her breakfast table. Dismay turned her tone of voice from determination to desperation. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for that 'in the morning' we promised each other. Did I misunderstand the invitation to join you?"

Did he misunderstand? Did the very sight of him make her blood pressure play hopscotch with her breathing? Caught off guard, Toni didn't have a chance to protest. The man was a chameleon. This morning he was wearing jeans and running shoes more scruffy than her own. Toni leaned against the edge of the table to support herself as she tried to still her jangled nerve endings.

"Captain Ware, I think that we—"

“—have plenty,” Annie interrupted smoothly, winking at Adam as she set a plate in front of him. “Scrambled eggs all right with you, Toni?”

“But Annie. I thought you said Fred was on his way over.” Toni’s warning went unheeded as Annie handed Adam the coffeepot and he began to fill their cups.

Toni sank weakly into a chair and lifted the cup to her mouth. It was hot, too hot. “ ‘Simple Simon met a pieman going to the fair’ And that’s where I ought to be, in a carnival.”

Adam grinned. “Another children’s rhyme?”

Toni blew into her cup and didn’t answer. There was no point in letting the man know how his presence affected her.

Annie divided the pan of scrambled eggs into four parts and spooned a portion onto each of their plates, leaving the last serving in the pan on the stove. She placed the plate of hot biscuits on the table and sat down.

“Do you know,” she said, “that the doorbell plays ‘We’re off to see the wizard’?” She didn’t wait for Adam to acknowledge her remark. “It’s like living in a fairy tale. The bathroom has swans on the wallpaper and a yellow-brick floor.”

“Swans? Of course.” Adam nodded and began to eat.

“What do you mean, of course?” Toni asked. She bit into a biscuit, trying hard to regroup her aberrant nerve endings into some semblance of order.

“Tarzan?” he said. “Baba Yaga and her flying teacup? Nursery rhymes? Fairy tales? What else would we find in a magic place? Do you allow dragons and goblins in your enchanted land?”

“Only the two-footed kind who sneak in when my back is turned.”

“I didn’t sneak. I was invited.”

“My mistake.”

“Why do I get the feeling that nobody knows I’m here?” Annie said wryly. “Maybe I ought to go and make up the bed or something.”

“Don’t mention beds,” Toni snapped. “I mean, you stay right where you are. You offered Captain Ware breakfast. Let him eat.”

“Well,” he said, “technically breakfast wasn’t specified, but this is a welcome change from the Waffle House.”

“Then,” she continued in a rush, ignoring his intimate smile, “he’ll have to go because you and I have a meeting to go to Annie. We wouldn’t want to interfere with the Captain’s carrying out his official duties.”

“No problem, Ms. Gresham,” he said. “As of last night, you became my official duty.”

She stiffened. “What do you mean? Surely there must be more desperate criminals breaking the law in Atlanta, Georgia.”

“I thought I told you. The City Council assigned me to stop the muggers any way I could. I haven’t even seen a mugger. You have. And since I know you aren’t going to follow orders, I think I’ll just join your band. I thought I’d attend the meeting with you two ladies. Afterwards, I suspect I’ll have a hankering for a Varsity hot dog and fries for lunch. What do you think, partner?”

“You mean you’re going to follow me?” She was incredulous. “I won’t allow it. You

can't force your presence on me. And we're not partners!"

"Not yet. But as I recall, outlaw, last night you offered Plan A,—food, which you failed to provide. Then there was Plan B, a matter of this morning that you seem to have forgotten about. So, I'm taking the situation into my hands officially with Plan C."

"And what is Plan C?"

Adam smiled. The curve of his lips came slowly, revealing strong white teeth and changing his stern expression into one of conspiracy and secrecy. That smile created a picture in her mind of being drawn into his arms as surely as if she'd moved around the table.

"I'm joining your band of merry men."

Toni exploded with furious indignation. "Not in this lifetime, Kojak! If you think for one minute that you're going to move in on me, you've got another think coming."

She sprang to her feet and resolutely crossed her arms over her chest, every movement a dare, every step away from the man a breath-giving move.

"Well, darling, it's up to you. We can do this amicably, or we can do it the hard way. As long as I'm with you, you'll know where I am. If I'm not, you can never be sure."

"You mean you'd shadow me, stake out my house?"

"Yep."

Toni knew he had her backed into a corner. Sitting at the table with that maddeningly innocent smile, he drank his coffee and continued eating with a deliberately slow pace. They might as well be back in the woods. He might as well be holding her down on the ground. She couldn't be any more aware of his physical presence.

She tried another tactic. "What if I gave you my word that I won't set up any more stakeouts in the woods?"

"You mean like you wouldn't run away while I looked for my gun? I don't think so, babe. Your word isn't reliable. I think I'll just stick around."

"Why?"

Adam laid his knife across the top of his plate and considered his answer. He could tell her that he'd had no intention of being at her breakfast table when he'd left her the previous night. He'd already made that decision when he pulled out clean jeans and a shirt and dressed. Halfway to her house he gave up lying and justified his action by telling himself he'd warn her that any further rule-breaking wouldn't be treated so lightly.

Now as he lifted his gaze to hers, he knew he was facing a problem that wouldn't easily be solved. For ten years he'd played it safe, avoiding any entanglement that might lead to a permanent relationship. He'd seen too many of the men he worked with go through depression, bouts with alcoholism, and divorce, and he'd determined long ago that the only person he wanted to depend on was himself.

Then this woman sailed through the night, crashed into his heart, and dismantled every good intention he'd paved his future with.

"Why?" he repeated. "I'm sure as hell don't know."

"We're off to see the wizard," the doorbell trilled happily, announcing another visitor along for the ride.

“Shall I?” Annie asked pleasantly.

“Yes. No, never mind. I’ll get it.” Toni circled the table and started across the kitchen.

“Toni, girl—the sun is bright—I’m glad you’re out—’twas such a fright. Oops, the fuzz.” Fred’s broad smile and lazy amble into the house came to an abrupt stop when he saw Adam at the table.

“Morning, Fred. I’d recommend the biscuits. They’re pure magic.” Adam pulled out the chair beside him and motioned for Fred to sit.

The older man looked from Adam to Toni. He was clearly disturbed by the unexpected presence of the police officer.

“It’s all right, Fred. Sit down,” Toni said. “Captain Ware has decided to join our little band.”

“You mean he’s going to help us scare muggers?” Fred’s rap talk dried up in the wake of his surprise.

“Not exactly,” Adam drawled. “I’m going to make sure you don’t chase any more muggers. Coffee?”

“Uh-huh. That’s what I thought you meant.” Fred nodded and dropped into the empty chair.

Adam ate slowly, as if he were savoring the famous Sunday brunch at the Waverly Hotel.

Toni paced.

Annie hummed the remainder of the song from the *Wizard of Oz* under her breath.

The silence fed the growing tension, yet nobody spoke.

“All right,” Toni finally snapped. “What’s wrong, Fred? What’s the bad news? Forget the warden is here and tell me.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. I’ll go crazy if you don’t spit it out, and Captain Ware here isn’t going to give us any privacy, are you?”

“You got it, outlaw.” Adam finished off his last bit of food, wiped his mouth, and leaned back in his chair.

“It’s the Swan Gardens,” Fred began hesitantly. “They’ve been sold. Can you believe that? Those sleaze balls sold the Gardens a month ago and nobody said a word about it.”

“Swan Gardens. That’s where you work, isn’t it?” Adam sat up, interest evident in his voice.

“Yep. Toni got me the job as janitor. They even furnished me a little apartment in the basement. Now it’s going, the whole thing.”

“Why?” Toni asked puzzled. “The property is behind that new office complex. Peachtree Park borders the other side so the property is too small to develop. What would anybody else want with it?”

“Oh, they’re not going to develop it commercially. They’re going to turn it into luxury apartments and sell them to the people that rent them.”

“Sounds like a good deal for the renters,” Adam said.

“Naw, man. The youngest person in that building is Willie Benson, and he’s fifty-eight and in a wheelchair. Those old people won’t never find a safe place to live that they can

afford. Like it or not, they're out of there."

"But surely they can't do that," Toni protested. "They'd have to have approval from the zoning and planning board."

"Already got that," Fred said. "You know how anxious our council is for progress. Get rid of the bums and the old folks. This is a city of the future."

"Well, we won't stand for it," Toni declared. "We'll make signs and picket. We'll—"

"Have to work fast," Fred interrupted. "They're even buying up the leases. The residents have sixty days to get out."

"And these are the people you work for," Toni exclaimed, turning to Adam. "Our fine City Council that's more interested in progress than it is in people. I hope you've made plans for your old age because you might just find yourself turned out of the only home you've ever known in a few years."

"I'm sure there's some mistake, Toni," Adam said placatingly. "Let me check into it. I seriously doubt that the mayor even knows about this. In spite of what you think, he is concerned about the problem of the elderly."

"Fine. So am I. In the meantime, if we can't chase crooks, we'll do something about new housing for the Swan Gardens residents. Let me think about it." She opened the sliding glass doors, stepped out onto the redwood deck, and began pacing around the house.

Adam didn't like the look of determination on her face. Having her students do repair work for the elderly was reasonable. Her good deeds were public knowledge, according to the city housing office which knew of her work and silently applauded her efforts. Even hiding in a tree to scare a mugger was admirable in a crazy kind of way, but taking on an entire building of displaced families was something else. He went to the phone in the living room and called his office. After a few discreet inquiries he hung up in disgust and returned to the kitchen just as Toni strode back inside.

"You're right," he said.

"I've got it," she said simultaneously.

"Got what?" Adam was afraid to hear her solution.

"Right about what?" she asked warily, again speaking at the same time.

"All right, Captain," she said, "you first."

"Fine. I called downtown. The sale is official."

"And there's nothing we can do about it, right, Kojak?"

"I'm afraid not. The inspector tells me that the building is in disrepair. There have been several citations by the fire department and the department of inspections. It's financially impractical to make the necessary repairs based on the current income from the building. They have no real choice. I'm sorry, Toni. I'm afraid you can't change this."

"That's all right, Captain. I think I have a solution. Instead of using my students for repair work, we'll renovate an entire building. Once we're finished and the Swan Gardens people move in, our mayor will see what concerned citizens can do without the help of the city."

"And I suppose you have a site in mind?" He knew as he asked the question that he

wasn't going to like the answer.

"Of course. Fred, how many people do you think we can depend on to help?"

"Counting your students and my people, I'd say about fifteen. Why?"

"I'll help," Annie said. "I ain't much with a hammer and nails, but I can keep the soup pot going."

"Which building, outlaw?" Adam's determined voice cut through the enthusiasm.

"Why, the old prison farm, of course. Fred, reset the meeting over at the Swan Gardens for tomorrow. I'll get started on the crews and supplies."

"No way, Ms. Gresham. As a police officer I tell you that the building isn't safe. There are more drugs sold in the old prison yard than anywhere else in downtown Atlanta. You can't ask those old people to move to a place like that."

"Yo, Toni, the dude is right—those little ladies—would die of fright," Fred said, reverting to a staccato rap. "We'll have to find—another way—to relocate those kids—from yesterday."

"Once it's cleaned up, the drugs will go," Toni said positively.

"If you live that long," Annie mumbled as she filled Fred's plate.

"We'll convince them—I've got it. The first apartment will be mine. I'll move in and stay there. If a young single woman is safe, they'll be safe."

"You'll be safe all right, my little lawbreaker. You'll be in jail and the rest of your merry band will be there with you. And who's going to put up the bail money? Assuming, of course, that your helpers don't already have records that will prevent their release."

Toni shot around the table. "You wouldn't. You wouldn't dare arrest us for helping those poor people. That building isn't being used for anything."

"Exactly. It's been vacant for forty years. Be honest, Toni, you couldn't make that place livable, no matter how hard you tried. I'm sorry, babe. I'll set up an interview for you with the mayor."

"Sure you will. When?"

"Tomorrow. Maybe he can find a building for them."

"Oh, right. I know a get-out when I hear one. I've heard all this before, Captain."

"Not from me, you haven't." Adam found himself defending a position that even he didn't believe in. The mayor was interested in the plight of the elderly, but he wasn't having much better luck than Toni.

"Atlanta doesn't have temporary housing," she went on. "Spend one night and out in the morning, if you're lucky enough to find a mattress in some church basement. No thanks. We've heard promises before. I hoped you'd be different. Don't you have a heart? What kind of man are you?"

"I'm the kind of man who tries not to worry about philosophical questions that don't have answers. Most of the people I know don't spend a lot of time trying to figure out who they are. They have to make a living. Of course, they don't live on the North Side."

Toni stiffened, clenching her fists to keep from hitting him. "How dare you categorize me? You're a hard, unfeeling man. This is our chance to make a real difference. But then, how would you know? You were never without a home. You've never been hungry

or—”

“And I suppose you have, Ms. Antoinette Gresham of the Sunnyside Food Greshams. You’ve been cold and hungry and homeless how many times in your pampered, foolish life?”

He hadn’t meant to strike out at her verbally, but she’d got him where it hurt. He knew about being cold and hungry. He knew only too well. There’d been plenty of times when he’d been worse off than Miss Riverside Drive could ever imagine. He tried to push those long-suppressed thoughts out of his head. But this time he couldn’t. She’d put him in the position of having to face his past and his future.

This wasn’t going the way he wanted it to. He’d intended to let Toni know he was concerned about the people she was trying to help, yet all they were doing was drawing battle lines. Her plan was foolhardy. He knew what type of people found their way to that old building, and neither Toni nor her Swan Gardens tenants belonged there. If they knew the truth, they wouldn’t even consider it. She was brave and foolish, and he knew he wasn’t going to stop her.

Desperately Adam reached inside his jeans pocket and retrieved the familiar ragged stump of a cigar. He clamped it between his teeth. “Toni, you’re such an innocent. You and your magic teacup and your yellow-brick road. You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

Toni pressed her lips together, her chin jutting forward as she valiantly fought to hold on to her last shred of dignity. She didn’t know why it was so important that Adam understand her, but it was. If she couldn’t bring him around, how could she ever expect to make a real difference in the city?

“How can you judge me, Captain Ware? You don’t have to die to experience the pain of death. I care about these people. Just because my family is wealthy doesn’t mean that I am. Every penny I make goes into my projects. Don’t you ever put me down because my family lives on Riverside Drive.”

Though Annie and Fred were both in the kitchen, Adam and Toni might as well have been alone. As she began moving toward him, Adam was shocked by the flare of heat between them. Clutching his cigar rebelliously, he stared at the woman who’d forced him to defend his employer’s actions. Hell, he didn’t even like the job he’d been given. At this point, he ought to be the one spouting nursery rhymes.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help them,” she said tautly, “including ...” Her voice trailed off as she took a quick look around. “You and I have to talk privately. Now. Come with me.”

He felt the warmth of her touch before she grabbed his hand. His shock over the sensation was surpassed only by his shock at her action. She drew him swiftly across the thick peach-colored living room carpet and into her bedroom. Kicking the door shut, she jerked his cigar from his mouth and draped her arms around his neck.

He had no opportunity to protest as she pressed her lips against his with a fierceness that swept his breath away. Her eyes were wide with elation, and excitement roared through him as he opened his mouth. Instinctively his arms went around her. A faint whisper escaped him as he felt her breasts press hard against him.



“Toni,” he gasped, pulling his head back. “Stop this.”

“Why, don’t you like it?”

“Are you trying to bribe me?”

“Of course. I’m stroking your fur.”

Her hand slid inside his shirt and lightly caressed his chest, setting off an avalanche of muscular spasms. Like it? Hell, yes, he liked it. The wench was seducing him. He was six feet tall and she was nearly a foot shorter, and she had him tied up tighter than a jail-breaking thief.

He pulled his mouth away from the heat of her lips and swallowed hard. It didn’t help. “Don’t do this, outlaw. There’s just so much a man can take.” His voice was husky with desire.

He tried not to see the brass bed behind her, the bed with the white satin cover pulled back as if she’d just risen, and the oversize pillows still intended with the shape of her head. A dizzying wave of yearning swept over him.

“I want you to want me,” she murmured. “Tell me you want me, Adam.” She caught his shoulders and pulled him closer, her lips playing across his face and mouth. “Tell me that you’ll forget what you heard here, Captain Ware, and I’ll ... I’ll ...” Her voice changed into a throaty whisper. “I’ll do anything you want.”

Her unexpectedly soft voice stopped him. He held her away from him and looked down into her blue eyes, glazed not with anger but with desire. Willing to give herself as hostage for her cause, Ms. Antoinette Gresham had been done in by her own game.

“Frankly, my dear,” he said softly, “I think what we have here is a case of the pot calling the kettle black.”

“What?”

“You’re offering yourself to me and I thank you. But I can’t accept. When we make love, and we will, it will be because you want me as much as I want you. I’ll wait.”

“You’re turning me down?”

“No, I’m turning you on and I think I like that better than a coldhearted bribe. Don’t worry, Toni. I know more than you think about not having a place to sleep. That’s why I’m not going to turn you in, and I’m not going to take advantage of you either.”

He gave her a quick, sweet kiss, then opened the door and led a stunned Toni back into the great room.

“You’re not going to stop us?” she asked.

“I don’t understand you, Toni, but anybody who believes in something enough to sacrifice herself for the cause must have one really big heart. So I’m going to take a rain check on your offer. Besides, you make a terrible vamp. You’re too emotional.”

“Terrible? Adam Ware, you’d better be careful. You’re going to make me madder than I already am.” She squeezed his big hand in warning.

He lifted her hand and examined her fingertips intimately. “You aren’t mad, darling.”

“How would you know?”

“Easy. No nursery rhymes. What are you going to do with my cigar?”

She was still clutching it in her other hand. “I’m going to throw it away permanently this time.”

“I need it, outlaw. It occupies my lips.”

“There are other vices.”

“So I’ve been told. Do you always approach everything you do with such enthusiasm, Toni Gresham?”

“Of course. Are you always so intense, Captain Ware?”

Adam groaned.

Toni sighed.

Baba Yaga’s teacup look-alike seemed to sway as if it wanted to break free of its moorings.

Annie and Fred looked back and forth at the two adversaries, holding hands and looking as though they were ready to be beamed up to the starship any minute.

“Oh, hell, Fred,” Annie snorted. “Put the milk and the rest of those uncooked eggs in the refrigerator quick. They managed to survive the heat in the van last night, but they don’t stand a chance now.”

The next morning the lobby of the Swan Gardens Apartment Hotel was crowded with grim-faced elderly people. Adam paused just inside the door and watched as Toni hugged and kissed her way through the throng to the shabby stairway.

She climbed the steps until she was high enough to be seen by the whole group. “Hi, guys. Looks like there’s trouble brewing.”

“Disaster,” one silver-haired woman said.

“What are we going to do, Toni?” another resident asked with a dejected shake of his head.

“Where will we go?” a third called out. “I’m all alone in the world.”

Toni held up her hands. “Now, hold on, people. What we’re not going to do is panic. I have”—she looked at Adam and corrected herself—“may have, a solution.”

The din of voices died away as every eye focused on the pint-size woman smiling confidently down at her band of admirers.

“What, Toni? What can you do?” someone asked disbelievingly.

Good question, Adam thought, and wondered how he’d become a part of Toni Gresham’s newest project. Didn’t the woman ever take time for personal things? He allowed himself to consider why there was no significant other. He’d made a point to find out about her private life from Fred. She was smart, no doubt about that. The classes she taught at the Atlanta Technical Institute were practical and worthwhile. Any student graduating from one of her classes would be equipped to work in the real world, and they didn’t drop out either. But her personal life was zilch.

Of course, there were those who would say the same thing about his. Outside of his police work, all his spare time was devoted to the Boys’ Club and the mayor’s special projects. If he’d been asked why he did it, he’d have said because it needed to be done. He watched blond curls bobble as Toni argued enthusiastically, if impractically, for her cause and decided that Toni’s answer would be the same.

“It isn’t just me, group,” she was saying, “it’s us. We’re going to renovate another building and move all of you in.”

“Renovate a building? In sixty days?” A man in a wheelchair rolled through the crowd to the front. “Toni, we love your enthusiasm, but sixty days isn’t enough time to get building permits. I know, I worked for the city housing department for thirty years.”

“Willie Benson?” Adam said, recognizing the voice. He made his way through the crowd to the man in the wheelchair. They’d known each other when Willie worked down at city hall.

“Adam Ware?” Willie said. “I don’t believe it. How’d you get tied up with this vigilante? Folks, this is an old friend from the police department. If Adam is involved in Toni’s idea, it just might work.”

“But Willie, I’m not ... I’m afraid ...” Adam’s voice trailed off as he saw the desperate

hope in the eyes turned on him. He could cheerfully have throttled Toni. What right had she to involve him in a half-baked idea that was sure to give false hope to these desperate tenants? Do-gooders! Dammit, it wasn't fair, none of it. But when had life ever been fair? He knew that Toni didn't have a chance in hell of pulling off this wild stunt, but how could he tell these old people?

"Adam is a city official, folks," Toni said. "City officials don't go out on limbs. We better not depend on—"

"Official channels," Adam interrupted sharply. "Without some kind of pressure, city hall won't issue permits until the project has approval by the zoning board."

Toni held her breath, waiting for Adam to tell them that her plan was doomed to failure, that she couldn't pull it off, that the whole idea was a long shot. Maybe he was right. But maybe he was wrong, and at this point what other chance did they have?

"So, Adam," she asked, "how do we apply official pressure?" She put her hands on her hips and waited, daring him to oppose her.

Adam opened his mouth to say that they didn't have enough official clout to get a license to sell flowers on a street corner. But one look at the set of her lips changed his mind. He was into it now. He glared angrily at Toni. She'd involved him in her project when all he'd wanted to do was see more of her.

His reputation had always been that if he did a thing, he did it well. So there was nothing for it now but to give these people his best shot. The mayor would hit the ceiling, but at least the mayor was in a position to stop Toni's foolishness before she went too far.

"We go to see the mayor," he said.

A mixed chorus of excitement and groans swept the room. Adam couldn't blame them for their reaction. The mayor talked a good game, but controlling City Council was another story and everybody in the room knew it. Still, he'd opened his mouth and he had no choice but to follow through.

"Fine," Toni said in dismay. She'd hoped that Adam had decided to help her, but his gesture didn't fool her. This was his way of delaying her, putting up roadblocks just as her parents had when they didn't approve of her actions. Talking to them never accomplished anything either. Long ago she'd given up on that and gone her own way. Well, so be it. If seeing the mayor would get Adam Ware out of her hair, she'd do it. "When?" she asked him.

"This afternoon. Is that soon enough?"

"All right, Captain Adam. Thank you I think." Her stern lips told him that her thanks were only for the benefit of his audience. She turned back to the residents. "In the meantime, I want to be honest with all of you. The building I have in mind is in bad shape. It's been vacant for forty years."

"Except for the ghosts," Adam said, a quirk in his smile.

"Ghosts?" Willie Benson repeated thoughtfully. "Ghosts. Vacant for forty years. You can't mean the old prison farm building, Toni?"

"Well, yes." She ignored the question in Willie's voice and the surge of whispers by rushing into a reassuring argument. "Don't be silly, you two, there aren't any ghosts."

And I know how bad it is. But I'm an engineer. Trust me, all we have to do is come up with the supplies. I already have the students who will do the actual work."

"What about us, Toni? Can't we help?" The speaker was an elderly man who was missing half of a finger on his right hand.

"No, it would be too dangerous for you. Don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

Willie took a deep breath and said, "Toni, I'm not sure that your choice is a good one. Maybe there aren't any ghosts, but aside from the building itself, that area is pretty dangerous, if I remember correctly."

"My argument exactly," Adam interjected with an I-told-you-so glare for Toni.

Toni noted the worried looks exchanged by her old friends and winced. This fear was all Adam Ware's fault. He was subtly undermining her project while seeming to be supportive. Well, he wasn't going to do it. Her plan might be too bold for him, but she wouldn't let him get in the way.

"Now wait a minute, people," she crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin. "Have I ever done anything to hurt or mislead you?"

Warmed by the resounding "No," she continued, drawing on her imagination as she spoke. "Listen, many of you lived in the Gresham family's mill village as children. You knew my grandfather. He cared about you and so do I. I know that the area has a bad reputation, but once we get it cleaned up and you move in, all that will change."

"Maybe," Willie said, "but suppose you're wrong. Even your grandfather couldn't keep the mill from closing. Don't you think we ought to hear what Adam's thoughts are on the safety factor?"

Desperately, Toni searched for a rebuke. "Adam is a police officer, and he's a cautious man. He can't afford to assure anybody about anything."

"If you mean," Adam said, "that I'm not going to mislead these people, you're right. The area is rife with vagrants and drug dealers. Even I wouldn't stay down there at night."

"Maybe you wouldn't, but I will," Toni announced. "If that's what it takes, I'll move in and spend every night there until we get the place ready for occupancy. Will that make you feel better?" She glanced at Annie and Fred for agreement. When she met their looks of skepticism, she was stunned.

"Oh, but it won't make me feel better, Ms. Gresham. Because you aren't going to do it. As a police officer, I forbid it."

"Oh, but I am, Captain Ware. And you're going to help me convince the mayor that it's a good idea or I'll—I'll tell the newspaper that my group took on the muggers in the park when the police department did nothing. And," she went on, warming up as Adam's expression grew even more stern, "that the vigilante charges against me were dropped because of my family's political connections."

"You'd better not!" Now Adam was really mad. He'd never received special favors and he'd never been blackmailed into giving them.

"Try me, big guy!"

Try her? Her eyes were flashing. Her breasts were heaving with anger. A confrontation with Toni Gresham wasn't what he wanted at all. The crowd was silent as

sizzling tension flashed between the two of them. Adam shook his head and considered his options. The sooner he got her out of there and to the mayor, the sooner this bizarre project would come to an end and these people could begin to make real plans. And the sooner he could take on Toni Gresham, one-on-one.

“Exactly what I have in mind, renegade,” he said in a voice of steel. “Get down off your soapbox and I’ll take you to my leader—now.”

“That’s more like it.” Toni gave a thumbs-up sign and made her way back to the doorway. She motioned to Annie and Fred, and they fell in behind her as she held out her hand in a sweeping motion. “After you, Captain. Let’s powwow. What’s next?”

“A Varsity Drive-in chili dog and an order of fries. Then we’ll move on to Plan D.”

“And what’s that?”

“I don’t think I’m going to tell you just yet. You’ll find out soon enough.”

Adam carried their tray of food into one of the many table-filled rooms of the restaurant, with Toni, Fred, and Annie bringing up the rear. Toni, directly behind Adam, silently appreciated the view of her adversary.

Dressed in faded jeans and a worn T-shirt that was a walking plea for funds for the Boys’ Club, he commanded attention by simply walking through the room with his springy, light step. He was big and muscular, but with the sleek, honed body of an ex-athlete who had let go of the muscle and extra weight and slimmed down into a broad-shouldered, lean-hipped man. He spoke to a couple of seedy-looking characters, found a table, and sat down.

Adam smacked his lips with anticipation. “Greasy fries, frosty orange drink, and hot dogs smothered in chili and onions. Just the way I like it. Tell me about your grandfather, outlaw. He must have been a good man.”

“He was very special. He knew every worker in the mill by his or her first name. I—I loved him very much.”

“And your father? Was he involved in the mill?”

Annie and Fred tore into their hamburgers and onion rings without joining into the conversation. Toni picked at her hamburger and diet cola and tried not to notice Adam’s sensual enjoyment of his meal.

“Yes,” she answered, “but when I was six years old my grandfather and father quarreled about the mill, and Dad went into banking. Grandfather died the next year.”

“And you miss him?”

“Yes, very much. He was ... my friend.”

Hearing the pain in her voice, Adam glanced up. He’d already learned enough about Toni to know that she and her parents weren’t close. She surrounded herself with projects and workers, but friends might be another story. He could identify with that.

Toni forced herself to take a long sip of her cola. Though she tried not to watch Adam, she couldn’t seem to stop herself. He held the hot dog loosely in his large hands and didn’t lose a single onion as he took a bite. He chewed slowly, with total concentration. Watching him eat confirmed what she’d already suspected. Whatever he did received

every ounce of his attention. She wondered what it would be like to be the object of that intense focus. Just then he looked up. As their eyes met, he stopped chewing. Toni felt a flush warm her cheeks. She swallowed hard and clasped the edge of the table.

"Sometimes you need someone just to be with," he said softly.

"Sometimes," she whispered.

"Oops, Fred." Annie leaned back. "Better move your milk shake. They're setting off sparks again."

By the time they reached city hall Toni felt washed out and exhausted. Being with Adam overstimulated her and depleted her energy like nothing she'd ever experienced.

The mayor was very pleasant until he heard Toni's incredible plan. "You want to spend the night in the prison farm to prove it will be a safe place for the elderly to live?"

"Yes, Your Honor. Then we'd like to negotiate with the city to renovate it for the residents of the Swan Gardens apartments, at no cost to the city, of course."

Adam didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The mayor was about to take care of the problem of Toni Gresham and the prison for him.

"Absolutely not, Miss Gresham. That building is structurally unsafe. There is no way I could sanction such an idea. Even if you did manage to spend the night to prove that it is safe, any renovation/land use plan would have to go before the city housing authority board and the City Council for approval. The building has been approved for low-rent government housing already, but not the funds."

"Low-rent government housing isn't exactly what I had in mind, Mayor. Private renovation of the building will be faster and less expensive. Do you think you could get that approved instead?"

The mayor sighed, lifting his hands in defeat. "Who knows? I've been trying to get that project addressed for the last two years. Unsuccessfully, I might add, and that was before the question of finding a site for the Olympic complex for the '96 Summer Games came up."

"Olympic site?" Toni was rattled. That would really ruin her idea.

"Actually, no. The proposed site is adjacent to the prison farm. But the council is reluctant to move forward on a decision until they get the results from the Olympic site committee. They'd rather wait until we get some kind of answer. And that won't come until September."

"Well, maybe a little publicity would fire up the support of the citizens for both the games and my cause," Toni suggested. "If they found out what we want to do, I'm sure we could force some kind of action."

The mayor considered her suggestion for a moment.

"That may be, Miss Gresham, but I'd want to check with city planning and the housing authority before I could encourage your efforts. Suppose you let me do some investigating. I'll get back to you."

"But Your Honor, we don't have that much time," Toni began.

Adam cut her off gently. "Toni, face facts. There's no way that anybody could renovate that old building in the sixty days you have, even if the city agreed to your plan."

Toni stood, her dejection written plainly on her face. "Then I'll just have to do something else. Thank you for your time, Mayor."

"I'm sorry, Miss Gresham. The city is well aware of the generosity of your family and how you personally extend yourself for the needy. I can't, in good conscience, authorize your plan, but I can have the housing board give the residents of the Swan Gardens more time to make their moves. I'll even assign Captain Ware to give you a hand in finding another site for your project."

"No!"

"No!"

Both Toni and Adam objected instantly.

"Thank you, Your Honor," Toni said, "but I'm sure Captain Ware has far more important things to do than follow me around. I do appreciate the time extension, though."

"I think the criminal element in the city would be pleased to hear that Captain Ware is off the streets for a few days. What about it, Adam? Will you give Miss Gresham a hand for a day or two?"

"Certainly, Mayor," Adam agreed stiffly, shaking his employer's hand. "I'll ask around down at housing and see what I can find."

There was nothing Toni could do but agree and hold her tongue as Adam piloted her out of the mayor's office and back to the street. There was nothing Adam could say when Toni told Annie and Fred that, thanks to Adam, they would have to find another solution to the Swan Gardens problem.

"Thank you, Captain Ware," she said with artificial sweetness. "I'm sorry that I didn't let you choke on that cigar. Do you realize that in two days' time you've managed to stop my Peachtree Vigilantes and torpedo my plan to help a group of people in need of housing? I hope you're as good at your job as you are at interference."

"I guess this means there won't be any more 'in the morning's?" Adam didn't know why he said that. Any mornings with Toni Gresham were likely to be cartoons instead of fairy tales. He'd already decided she was the roadrunner and he was the coyote. Any kid knew what happened in that contest.

"You got it, Captain. Good-bye."

"What, no more vamping scenes?" He couldn't seem to let her go. "I liked having my fur stroked."

"Annie was wrong. You're no pussycat, you're a chameleon, blending in with whichever group of people you happen to be with at the time."

He slid his gaze lazily down her tiny figure, appreciating the energy she generated. "But what about the mayor's assignment? I'm supposed to help you find another building. You wouldn't want to make me lose my job, would you?"

"You look for a building your way, and I'll look for one in mine." She flagged a passing cab and crawled in the front seat with the driver, motioning for Annie and Fred



to take the back.

“Just a minute, outlaw. It’s time for Plan D.” Adam leaned inside the open cab window.

“Oh? What’s that?”

When he kissed her, she wasn’t even surprised. Only an impatient car horn from behind forced her to pull away. “How many letters are there in the alphabet?” she asked dreamily.

“Twenty-six, Toni, and I’m making plans for every one of them.”

He watched the cab pull off, Toni facing firmly forward. Only Annie leaned her head out the window and just as they turned the corner, gave Adam a big conspiratorial wink.

The wink helped. Even as he told himself he would do well to get rid of the woman, along with her wild ideas, he felt an odd sense of failure that the mayor hadn’t been more positive. His promise to check around wouldn’t hold the outlaw back.

Toni Gresham was too impulsive, jumping in over her head with no thought of the risks she might be taking. Toni Gresham was a disaster just waiting to happen. And he was totally preoccupied by the woman. Any chance of working out that attraction had effectively been blocked by the mayor’s making him responsible for her. Great!

In the cab Toni was waging her own war for independence. Adam Ware was simply a barrier, she told herself. Getting around barriers was something she was considered an expert at. She supposed she was a Gresham hereditary throwback. Her kind of bulldog determination certainly wasn’t a characteristic of her father’s generation.

Toni winced. She didn’t want to think about what her mother and father would say about her latest idea. She simply wouldn’t tell them. They never approved of anything she did anyway. Engineering was bad enough; they’d never understand why she was renovating an entire building. The only part of this project her mother might approve of was Adam Ware. At this point in Toni’s life, her mother would probably look kindly even on a cop. Toni smiled. Introducing him to her parents would be a real “hoot.”

Still, Adam was the same kind of barrier to progress that her parents were. Where he was a stickler for the law, they were mired in society’s rules of etiquette and propriety. The difference was that Adam was coming at her from a new direction. Her mind was saying whoa, but her overcharged body said go for it. She wasn’t sure she could stand the kind of armed conflict the two factions were setting up. She sighed again. Oh, Grandpa, she said silently, if only I was still six years old and you were here. We’d show them a thing or two.

“Toni, girl,” Fred rapped from the rear, “now listen here. You’ve met your match, but have no fear. Our Captain Ware is quite a man, and you’ve got him now in Toni’s land.” Fred’s smile was happy. Annie’s smile was happy. The cabdriver just shook his head and drove.

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Adam walked down the street toward the Boys’ Club. On his days off he coached the

basketball team. That day he had a game, and it would be over before he went on duty. And at least it would take his mind off the outlaw and her illegal activities. It ought to be safe to leave her for one afternoon. It would take her that long to regroup.

The game was hot and fast. Adam had to coach both teams, as he often did, and referee as well. It was late afternoon when he checked in at Police Headquarters and found a message on his desk instructing him to see the mayor. Adam went to the squad locker room to shower and change into his dress blues and captain's gear, then walked over to City Hall.

He wished he felt better about Toni and their meeting with the mayor, and hoped that the message meant the mayor had come up with an answer—or at least a new assignment that didn't deal with a pint-size kamikaze pilot.

Half an hour later Adam had his answer. The old prison farm was being staked out for a drug sweep, beginning that night. It was a good thing Toni's idea about spending the night in the building had been nipped in the bud by the mayor.

Adam left the mayor's office confident that he'd been right to stop Toni. By now she'd probably have come up with some other scheme just as impossible, but at least she wouldn't be in danger. Still, it wouldn't hurt to check on her. After all, he rationalized to himself, the mayor had practically made him her bodyguard. He'd arrested her, thwarted her plans, and kissed her. The arrest and the interference had been for her own good. The kiss ... The kiss had been for his.

At the corner he stopped at the newsstand and bought a cigar to replace the one Toni had helped him kill. At the rate he was going he would need it. He unwrapped the cigar and jabbed it into his mouth. Since he didn't smoke the things, it always took a serious problem or two, and a certain amount of use, to customize the fit.

By the time he reached the police parking lot and cranked the engine on his van, he knew the cigar wasn't going to help. The need he was fighting could only be filled by a wild-eyed jungle girl who lived in a magic house sprinkled with stardust.

The magic teacup was empty and silent in the early-evening light. There was no sign of Toni or Annie. Fred wasn't in his apartment, and the Swan Gardens residents were strangely reticent about where he might be.

After a casual check of the Omni Hotel and Convention Complex, Adam admitted that all three of his vigilantes had vanished. It was too early in the evening for them to be staking out the park for muggers.

The old prison farm! She'd ignored the mayor.

"Fiddlesticks!" he muttered. Oh, hell. Now she had him spouting nursery rhymes too. He put on his blue light on the roof of his van and back-tracked through the downtown streets until he reached the thicket of trees. Once inside, he pulled behind an old shed, cut the motor, and walked down the broken concrete road to the prison. He'd been right. He'd underestimated Toni Gresham and her determination—again.

There were college students, old men, young boys, all busily attacking the building as though they'd been given fifteen minutes to work, with a prize for the group that made the most progress. They all paused at Adam's arrival, relaxing only when Dead Fred gave them a thumbs-up sign and walked over to where Adam was standing.

"I didn't believe she'd do it," Adam said, staring incredulously at the swarm of activity around the old jail.

"Believe it, Captain. I say to you, our Toni girl is do, do, do!" Fred grinned broadly as he wiped perspiration from the top of his bald head with a large red bandanna, then retied the bandanna around his forehead. Wearing one dangling silver earring and combat boots, he even looked like a member of a street rap gang.

"Who are all these people?" Adam asked.

"Friends. Helping Toni get a head start on her project. Toni figures that by the time we get the public aroused and city hall gives us permission, we will already have a renovation plan underway."

Adam groaned. He should have known Toni wouldn't be content to do things in an orderly, legal way. That wasn't her style.

"Where'd all the kids come from?" He gazed with genuine concern at a pack of boys between about twelve and sixteen hacking away at the kudzu growing wildly up the stone wall of one of the prison's two turret watchtowers.

"Boy Scouts," Fred explained, motioning to an older man who'd just driven a van into the yard. An empty pickup truck followed him. "Hey, you guys, thanks. Quitting time for tonight. Turn in your tools."

After a few arguments the scouts and the students began stacking their tools and climbing into the van.

"These guys belong to Toni's troop," Fred added.

"Toni has a Boy Scout troop?"

“They needed a leader. You ought to know by now, if there is anybody who needs help, Toni’s there for them. She took over the troop and helped them earn money for their uniforms. They think she walks on water.” He gave Adam a hard look and added, “So do the rest of us, and we wouldn’t like to see her hurt.”

The van, now full of scouts and college students, pulled around and left the courtyard by the same secluded road Adam had used two nights earlier when he arrested Toni Gresham. The road had been cleared, making it usable while still hidden from the city.

“How’d you get the road widened?”

“Toni has a friend with a motorgrader.”

“Of course. Toni has lots of friends.” Adam thought out his words, careful to make his statement one of concern rather than censure. He knew he had to work fast to get those people out of there before the after-dark stakeout squad arrived. “College students are one thing, Fred, but it isn’t safe for teenage kids to be swarming over a hundred-year-old building.”

“Oh, Toni wouldn’t let them get into a dangerous area. Her ideas may be wild, but she’s an engineer, Adam, a good one. She wouldn’t take chances with anybody else. Besides, I’m keeping an eye on them.”

Adam followed Fred across the yard and into the old prison building. In the back area a grimy, unsteady crew of street people were gamely attacking piles of rubbish.

“More of Toni’s construction crew, Fred?”

“Yep. They pitch in from time to time. All of them owe Toni something. A box house, a free meal, a loan now and again.”

Hard-core homeless or just temporarily down and out, Adam thought, at least these men understood the hazards of vacant buildings. He wondered how long they’d last, then saw the determined expressions on their faces and decided it didn’t matter. They were doing what they could. They were there. Toni had made them feel important, something he hadn’t been able to do.

“Listen to me, Fred,” he said seriously. “I can’t tell you why, but trust me. Please get all the rest of these people out of here now. Quick! While you’re doing that, I think you’d better direct me to your leader.”

Fred stared at Adam, then nodded and strode through the building, dismissing the workers. The men glanced curiously at Adam, still wearing his blue uniform and captain’s hat, and he realized several of them looked familiar. He’d probably arrested most of them at one time or another. The building was swiftly emptied; and the sound of the truck’s leaving threw the area into silence.

It was amazing what they’d accomplished in a few hours, Adam thought, glancing around. He had to admit that he felt a certain pride in Toni’s determination and the loyalty she inspired. All these people followed her like children following the Pied Piper. Why then did he feel like the only rat in her pack?

Fred pointed toward a far corner. “Toni decided to build her apartment back there in what must have been the administrator’s private office.”

“Her apartment?” Adam exploded. Engineer or not, she had been told by the mayor the place wasn’t safe.

“The apartment she’s planning to camp out in,” Fred said. “I’ll tell you, man, I’m worried about this. She’s convinced that if she stays out here alone, the residents over at the Swan Gardens won’t be afraid and the publicity will force city hall to give in. But I don’t know. This place is a real mess.”

“Believe me, Fred, there is no way,” Adam said firmly. “She’s not going to stay here by herself.”

“Sure. You tell her, man.” Fred stepped over a pile of trash and waited for Adam to follow. “I’ll just get Annie and we’ll leave you and Toni to hash this out.”

“Evening, Adam,” Annie called when they appeared in the doorway. She was washing windows that hadn’t allowed the light of day in for years.

Adam stepped into the room and glanced around, casually looking for the woman who’d ruined his peace of mind and turned him into a baby-sitter. Toni Gresham was a disaster looking for a place to happen, and this appeared to be as good a spot as any. The world needed protection from her rashness.

The argument started up again, the one he’d held with himself all day. He didn’t need a woman like her in his life, a woman carried away with being a do-gooder. Those people meant well, but they never really changed anything. About the only thing they accomplished was making a name for themselves.

Still, short of kidnapping her, he couldn’t see any way to stop her. Toni thought she was invincible. Maybe she was a real witch, a witch who lived in a teacup. Look at what she’d already done to him. She’d caused him to mutilate and swallow his favorite cigar. Then, after he’d rescued it from the trash can, she’d thrown it over the teacup rail. Now she’d put some kind of spell on him. All he could think about was fairy tales and moonlight kisses.

“Good evening, Annie,” he said. “I see you managed to cut the bars off the windows.”

Annie slapped her hip and chortled. “Yep. Always did want to rip those suckers off. Finally got my chance.”

“You might have been better off leaving them on. At least they might keep out the bad guys.”

“Not likely, Captain. There’s enough holes in the walls of this old place to let an elephant in. You know that Toni’s planning on staying here? I’m worried. Can’t you change her mind?”

“I’m sure as hell going to try. Where is Ms. Gresham? Flying about the city on her broom?”

“In the bathroom, working on the plumbing,” Annie answered with a smirk, waving her hand toward a door in the back wall. “We got the water turned on, but there’s so many leaks in the pipes, we had to cap most of them off.”

“I don’t think I’m going to ask how you managed to get the water turned on.”

Fred slapped Adam on the shoulder. “Good idea, man. Come on, Annie. You and me have to talk.”

The two left the room, and Adam could hear Fred whispering to Annie under his breath.

“Hot damn!” Annie exclaimed after a minute. “But we’ve got no car. We’ll just wait in

the woods where it's cool."

"Sure, go on, you two," Adam muttered. "Run out and leave me to face her alone." But he was talking to the air. "Why do I feel like Daniel going into the lion's den?" His voice seemed too loud in the sudden silence. He followed Annie's direction, opened a door in the rear wall, and found himself in a large bathroom.

At first glance, except for some spiders and a cricket singing in the corner, the bathroom was empty in the twilight. At second glance he spotted a pair of bare, well-formed, dirt-smeared legs sticking out from the cabinet beneath a rusty sink.

The body was in there somewhere, and the body was probably clothed, though as far as he could see there were no signs of it. Surely an engineer didn't come to a construction site in a bikini. Even Jane wore a loincloth in the jungle.

Loincloth. At the mere thought of the word *loin*, he felt an answering response in his own. He took a deep, calming breath. No way was he going off on a sexual tangent with this woman again. He had to get her out of there and do it soon. There was less than an hour of daylight left. As soon as darkness fell, the sweep team would take their places. Being caught up in a drug bust wasn't the kind of publicity Toni needed.

Take care of business, Adam, he admonished himself, even if her legs did make Bo Derek's look like puny matchsticks in comparison. He couldn't let himself be swayed from doing his duty.

He shook his head. He was delaying the confrontation. It didn't matter what he told himself. Other than an angry red scab on one knee, Toni's slim, suntanned legs were just about perfect. He'd bet money that beneath those scruffy Reeboks, her toenails were painted a soft, feminine peach color.

From beneath the sink came a half-muffled, "Fee, Fie, foe, fell!"

"Fell?" Adam cleared his throat. Honest curse words he knew; it was Toni's nursery rhymes that were foreign to him. His mother had never had the time to read to him as a child. The truth was, she didn't read well and was too proud to admit it. But this rhyme he remembered. He must have heard it in school.

"Fell! Fell!" Toni exclaimed. "Okay, so it's fum. FEE! FIE! FOE! FUM! Whoever you are, I bloody well need an Englishman or anybody else with a strong arm down here."

"Sorry, no Englishman around. An ex—Cabbage Town bum is as close as I can come. Will that do?"

"Adam?" There was a long silence. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know. Just say that I'm one of those masochists who needs daily abuse. What are you doing, besides, breaking the law, defrauding the city water department, and attempting to incite men to riot with those legs?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind. What's wrong under there?"

"It's these pipes. I can't get them together. They're rusty and the sleeve won't move up and down."

"Well, I wouldn't worry. You aren't going to need plumbing because you aren't going to stay."

"Oh, yes, I am, and I'm going to need some help. I can't let go, Adam, not without

causing a small flood.”

“Flood? Where is the water cutoff?”

“You’d never find it, Adam. You’ll have to get down here and give me a hand.”

Arguing with Toni took too much time. He’d have to connect the pipe. “All right. Come out and let me have a look. I don’t know how you expect to work in the dark.”

“I have a flashlight in my bag, but I can’t let go or I’ll never get it back together again. Can’t you just kind of slide in here with me?”

Adam groaned. There was just about enough room for Toni. “The only way I can get inside that cabinet to help you, Ms. Gresham, is by lying on top of you or underneath you, and I don’t think either method is going to ... get your problem solved.”

“Sure it will. I’ll lift my legs up and you slide under.”

“Toni, I don’t think you quite understand. I’m wearing a navy-blue police captain’s dress uniform. Sliding along on this floor would cost more than hiring a plumber, which is what I recommend you do.”

“Can’t do that, Captain. The water department would shut us down. Besides, we don’t have that much time.”

“Time?” She was right about that.

“It’s getting dark. Hurry, Adam.”

The slight tremor in her voice was enough. He bent down. Beneath the sink he could see that she was grimly holding the tailpiece and the trap together with one hand and the leaking water pipe together with the other. She was right. If she allowed the pipes to separate, she’d get a face full of rusty water.

She was right about something else too. He didn’t have time to argue any further. Glancing around, he shook his head in disbelief and closed the door. “I don’t believe I’m doing this.” He quickly stripped off his tie, his uniform jacket, and shirt. The shoes went next. He left his socks on and rolled up his pant legs.

“I’m sending you the cleaning bill, outlaw.”

“I’ll pay it. Please hurry, Adam. I can’t wait much longer.”

“All right, let me underneath you. I’ll reach around you and see if between the two of us we can fix your pipe.”

The only part of Adam that Toni could see was a pair of muscular, hairy legs. A very sexy pair of legs wearing black, calf-high dress socks. The legs were lowering themselves to a squatting position as Adam sat down, then stretched out on the floor at her feet.

Yep, from her ground-level view she could verify her earlier observation. He was a big man, in every sense of the word. All afternoon she’d managed to keep her conscious mind off the brooding dark man who could have a roguish look of anticipation on his face one minute and the devil of an anger the next. And all afternoon her subconscious had known she was just fooling herself.

Now he was lying on the dirty floor of the prison farm in his dress blues, sliding sensuously beneath her lifted hips. Toni felt his bare chest and his ... She gasped.

The pipe shifted. She jerked her attention back to it. By the time Adam reached around her chest to slip the nut over the coupling, Toni’s breath was ragged. The periodic spray of water was a welcome relief from a heat that was more than the honest

sweat of honest labor.

"The sealer is in that can by your left shoulder," she said in a voice that was too loud.

His large hands quickly applied the gummy adhesive and slid the nut up and down until he was satisfied the two pieces of drainpipe were fastened in place. Working almost by feel, he tightened the nut. Though the leak didn't completely stop, the threat of a flood was gone. Exhausted, Toni dropped her hands to her chest and cradled the can of sealer.

Adam replaced the top on the sealer and shoved the can out of the cabinet with a force that could be considered overkill at best.

"It needs soldering to do the job right. But I suppose you know that, Madam Engineer?"

"Yes."

"Now will you listen to me?" Speaking was a strain for Adam, both from Toni's pressing her backside into a section of his body that was learning new things about togetherness, and from his mind, which seemed stuck in the intimacy of the moment.

"No, I won't listen now," she said. "Now we turn it on and see what we've got." She flipped herself over in order to back out of the narrow cupboard. What she hadn't counted on was Adam's attempt to help her becoming something entirely different as his arms caught her around the waist.

"Listen, outlaw, the less turning on you do, the better. I'm still sore from our last encounter. We don't have time for any more of your vamping routine."

"Oh!" She'd forgotten about kicking him in her mad swing from the tree in the park. "I'm sorry. I'll be still," she said breathlessly. "I meant turn on the faucet. Oh, fudge, you're doing it to me again, making me forget what I'm saying."

"Yes, and it's nice."

She thought it was Adam who'd said it was nice, but she couldn't be sure. All she knew was that he was right. It wasn't her conversation he was affecting. It was body language. Her happy body was lying on top of his happy body, facing him, just as before, lips only a breath apart. This time the closeness was even worse. He wasn't protected by fatigue pants and a shirt. Turning over in close quarters had shoved her T-shirt up, so that they were skin to skin under the dark, hot cabinet, hidden from the world.

"You're nice." That definitely was Adam speaking. "You're making me want to kiss you, Toni Gresham."

"But you shouldn't. Kissing me isn't part of my construction schedule. You understand it's a matter of time and motion, efficiency."

"Kissing you isn't part of my schedule either. But I think we're going to have to do it, or neither of us is ever going to get on with business."

"You're very bossy, Adam Ware. And sometimes you're even right." She closed her eyes as she lowered her head, feeling the warmth of his breath on her face. He felt good. Touching him felt good. When his arms tightened around her, her mind roared with the singing of a wild wind. It was more than she could bear. Who kissed whom was unimportant. It was the kiss that took shape and grew into more than either had



expected.

Wonder turned into tenderness, which changed swiftly into desire as she felt his tongue make a passionate assault inside her mouth. The hands cradling her bottom lifted her possessively, bringing her closer to those lips as his mouth left hers, branded her forehead, slipped down her cheek, and lingered at the hollow of her neck.

“Ah, Toni, outlaw of the jungle, what are you doing to me? I’m consorting with a criminal, totally losing control. If you were mine, I’d lock you in your room.”

*If you were mine.* The words ran through her mind like some elusive scent that teased and disappeared. She gazed down into his eyes, running her fingers through the damply curling strands of his hair, feeling the rough stubble of beard on his cheeks, and thrilling to the knowledge that she could fire this fierce dark man with the same kind of desire that surged through her body.

She wanted to lay her head on his chest and feel the strength of his arms around her. She needed his strength, and that need surprised her. Always a loner, she’d never felt that way before. And she couldn’t allow herself to. Even the thought of belonging to anyone was wrong. She belonged only to herself.

Adam’s lips moved down to the top of her breasts and she moaned softly, closing her eyes, for fear of revealing what she was feeling.

“Adam, this isn’t right.”

“It feels right to me, but if you think we need more practice ...” His lips grazed her nipples. “A good law officer prides himself in doing his duty for ladies, old and young. Got any streets you want to cross?”

“I think I’ve already crossed it, Adam.” She pulled back and lay atop him for a long, still second, eyes open and mind desperately trying to put aside the lovely illusion of his touch. “Why do you keep sidetracking me? I know what you’re up to,” she said with pain in her voice. “You’re trying to make me forget what I’m doing here.”

“Forget? Not a chance. I want you to remember this. I want you to go through what I have for the last two days. I want you to think about this, and me, instead of all those other people.”

“What makes you think I haven’t, Adam Ware? You’re an unwanted intrusion that I don’t have time for. I know you don’t approve of me. Why didn’t you go someplace else and do your duty?”

“You’re not altogether a duty, Toni. Truth is, I don’t know what you are.”

“I’m just me, Toni Gresham, engineer, teacher, and compassionate person.”

He brushed her hair back from her face, then smoothed down her T-shirt and tugged at the bottoms of her cutoff blue jeans. “All I know is that we have to get out of here and discuss this.”

“No way. We discuss it now, while I have you at a disadvantage. Once you get your uniform on, you’ll get all pompous again. I think I like you better this way, half-naked and needy.” She kissed him again.

He allowed her to kiss him for a second before pulling away. “Needy? Is that the only way I’ll get your attention? You’re the most stubborn, unrealistic, out-and-out troublemaker that I’ve ever come in contact with.”

Every time Toni breathed, Adam became more aware of every inch of contact between their bodies. He was holding on to his control with all the concentration he possessed. Even still, he couldn't call back a slight upward arch. Nor could he ignore the responding flood of heat that erupted outward from the source of the fire.

He swore softly. "Never before have I met a woman so intent on wreaking pure havoc. I don't know what I'm doing—lying here under a sink in a dilapidated old building, necking with an outlaw."

"Lordy, I don't know either," came Annie's voice. "And I'm not getting down there to find out. But if you two don't want an audience, you'd better put your hormones on hold. A car just pulled up down the road, cut off its lights, and stopped. It's getting dark and the truck's not back yet. What do you say to Fred and me walking on over to Marietta Street to catch a bus?"

Adam raised up, bumped his head on the repaired pipe, cursed, and shimmied out from beneath the cabinet, bringing a flamed-faced Toni with him. She jumped to her feet and pulled down her shirt as Annie struggled to control the grin on her face.

"Don't you dare leave me here alone with this man, Annie."

"Listen, Toni, there are some things that don't need an audience. Besides, somebody has to wait for the truck to get back."

"But Annie, you don't understand. I couldn't get the pipes together. Adam had to help me. No, what I mean is ... Ah, tweedledee, tweedledum! Just forget it."

"Honey, it's been thirty years since I've heard an excuse that good. Even my late husband wasn't as creative. You don't have to explain. Believe you me, I know what you mean." She gave Adam a broad wink over Toni's shoulder and left the tiny bathroom.

Toni whirled around. "Now see what you did. You gave Annie the wrong impression. Why, we weren't ..."

"Not yet. But I think it was obvious to Annie that parts of us know others very well. And the doing was mutual, my little outlaw. We have to cool down and talk."

"Put your clothes on, Kojak. There's nothing to cool down." She spun back-around and called, "Wait a minute, Annie."

"Speak for yourself, Gresham," Adam said, "but that damp shirt of yours doesn't hide any more than my trousers."

Toni looked down at her taut nipples and groaned. The man was an out-and-out sex machine. And she responded every time he touched her.

"I don't know why you're in such a snit because there's a car in the woods," she said. "Probably some teenagers looking for a place to park."

"People don't park in cars anymore, outlaw. They don't have to. Except for a few renegades who find vacant buildings with sinks to hide under." He was searching for his shirt in the shadows. Darkness was almost complete and he knew they had to hurry.

"Well, maybe it's your ghost driving the car," Toni said. "Annie, you wait for me." She opened the door and stepped into the corridor. "No more being on the streets for you." She marched after Dead Fred and Omni Annie, placing herself squarely between them. "You're going to stay at my house, Annie."

"Nope, I think not. Your little teacup is nice, but it isn't for me. I like being my own

boss. There's a concert over at the Omni tonight and my regular folks will be looking for me. I'm an Atlanta institution, you know."

"But—but, Fred, Annie ..."

Adam came up behind her, sliding his shirt on. "Let them go, Toni. That's the problem with helping people. I learned it a long time ago, before I ever became a police officer. You have to accept what is and deal with it. You can't make people change just because you want them to. You're just fooling yourself."

"But you can't stop trying," Toni protested. "You just can't. You have to believe in people. If only one person benefits, you've done—"

"Quiet, outlaw, you're disturbing the ghosts."

Toni glanced around the building. The light was almost gone now. Darkness cloaked the prison like black fog. She shivered. She would never admit it to the others, but the thought of staying in the building alone was terrifying. Truthfully, she'd intended from the beginning to convince Fred and Annie to stay. Now they were leaving and it looked as if she'd be with the last man on earth she wanted to be alone with.

"I have to go with Annie," she said in a strained voice as she made a move toward the courtyard.

"No!" Adam grabbed her arm and pulled her back into the large open room. His whispered "no" said clearly that he would tolerate no defiance this time.

"How dare you, Adam Ware. What do you think you're doing?"

"One more word and I'll put a muzzle on you. For once in your life follow orders. I don't know who's out there, but I have a reasonably good idea. I tried to tell you that spending the night here was dangerous. Now you may have to stay."

"Stay here? With you?" Toni was beginning to realize he was serious. "Sure, and maybe whales take up writing poetry and join a commune. Out of my way, Kojak."

"Don't fight me on this, Toni. It's out of our hands. That's what I came to tell you. There's a drug sweep on for tonight. The Mad Dog Squad is putting this place under surveillance. I suspect that car may be the first team."

"Drug sweep? Oh, great. Just the kind of publicity I need. What about Annie and Fred?"

"Everybody on the street knows Annie and Fred are clean. If the squad even see them, they'll figure Annie was just hanging out in here and let them go."

"Going sounds like a good idea to me too. I think I've changed my mind about staying here tonight. Can't we slip out the back door? I'll come back for my sleeping bag and camping gear later."

Already the building was taking on sinister angles in the darkness. The windows that had sparkled so in the bright sunlight now looked like giant dark eyes, glaring at her.

"No," Adam said. "If the car in the woods doesn't belong to the boys, then it must be a deal going down. Annie and Fred might look legit, but an officer in dress blues could blow everything." He sighed in resignation. "This was your idea. We'll just stay here until I figure out what's going on."

"Wonderful. How long?" This time she didn't try to hide the shiver that washed over her.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered. “I’ll protect you from the bad guys.” He paused. “But I don’t know about the spooks.”

The old building creaked and groaned, filling the silence with little unidentified noises. Still, Adam figured he’d be able to hear any intruder.

“I wish you’d stop talking about ghosts,” Toni said crossly. “There aren’t any such things.”

“Maybe not. Now follow me, very quietly. If there is anyone out there, I want to see him before he sees us. The story goes that the ghost is a young woman who walks the halls at night, crying and moaning.”

“And I’ll bet I know who made that one up,” she said, unconsciously chewing on her upper lip. “How do you plan to get us home?”

“I thought you’d just whistle for your flying teacup. Move it, Toni.”

“Oh, you read the fairy tale.” She couldn’t conceal the unexpected surge of joy at his statement.

“Yep. Stopped by the library in the Boys’ Club this afternoon and looked up this Baba Yaga character. There’s just one little problem.”

“Oh, what’s that?” She stepped up behind him, peering outside with him through a gaping hole in the wall. His arm’s encircling her waist seemed as natural as her leaning into the curve of his shoulder.

“Baba Yaga’s vehicle wasn’t a teacup at all,” he whispered in her ear as he stared into the dark clump of woods surrounding the building. “It was a mortar and pestle, with long, skinny chicken legs.” He couldn’t see any movement. He’d wait until the last sliver of light was gone, then he’d reconnoiter. In the meantime, he had to keep her distracted. “Why’d you change it to a teacup? Witches don’t live in teacups.”

She could feel the strong, steady beat of his heart as he held her. “Adam Ware, in spite of what you may think, I’m not a witch. If I were, I’d turn you into a frog.”

“Do witches kiss frogs and turn them into princes?”

“How do I know? I’ve never met one.”

“Sure you have. Ribbet! Ribbet!”

Then he heard it, the sound of furtive footsteps and a whispered voice, just beyond the wall.

“Are you in there? Come on out, slow and easy. I have a gun on you.”

Adam didn't turn into a prince. But then he wasn't a frog. If he had been, Toni decided this would have been the time to croak.

He pressed his finger against her lips, and she obeyed his unspoken order, for once not questioning the man. The courtyard was not yet totally dark, though inside, the prison was like black ink. There were no streetlights and the moon wasn't up. The eerie quiet lifted goose bumps on Toni's arms. Somebody on the other side of that wall had a gun.

More footsteps. Someone else had walked from the other direction.

"I'm over here. You got ..." The voice became muffled. The two men walked away. There was a brief scuffle, an angry exchange of words, then silence.

After a long moment Adam let out a deep breath. He took a step back and drew Toni with him. "Let's go to your little bathroom. That seems to be the darkest section of the building, with no holes in the wall and no windows. That's where we wait."

"Wait? You've got to be kidding. For what?"

"I don't know, yet."

"Why not just go out and identify yourself to the mad dogs? Then we can get out of here."

Because, he wanted to say, it isn't safe. I'm not sure whoever's in the car is one of us. It's too early for the surveillance team and I don't know who those two men were. If something else was going down, he didn't want Toni in the middle of it. He'd already seen an example of her vigilante group in action. His chest still twinged from the imprint of her lethal foot.

What he said was, "No, we might stumble into something and mess it up. It's best if we wait." He led the way into the small room and closed the door. The room went black. Toni gave out a small yelp.

"What's wrong, outlaw?"

"It's very dark, isn't it?"

"Are you afraid?"

"Of course not!"

She was. He could feel her fear and automatically put his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. "Slide down the wall and we'll sit on the floor and talk."

She didn't fight his suggestion. He felt her silent sigh as her body molded against his and they dropped to the floor. "You've probably ruined your clothes."

"You can buy me some new ones. You're a woman of means." Her skin was damp. He caught the faint clean scent of wildflowers.

"How do you know that?" She tried to keep some distance between them, then gave up the idea as she took another breath. She was afraid of the dark. There was no defending, explaining, or pretending that she wasn't. As a child her grandfather had told

her fairy tales to take away her fear. After he'd died she'd continued to reach for those stories as her own kind of invisible protection.

Here in this wretched place the only one she could think of was "Little Red Riding Hood." She was afraid the Big Bad Wolf was already in the room with her, and she didn't even have a night-light.

Any idea Adam might have had about leaving Toni while he reconnoitered was quickly discarded as he realized her trembling was growing rather than diminishing. He'd had enough experience with terror to know that the second he left her, she'd probably start screaming. He'd have to wait. In the meantime he'd keep her mind off what was happening.

"I know you're an engineer," he said, "but why'd you decide to build a teacup?"

"Teacup? Oh, you mean my house." Toni's first inclination was to pass it off as architectural license. But she didn't. He'd been honest with her about the drug sweep and deserved an honest answer in return. If she could articulate reasons she'd never examined before.

"When I was a little girl, I was alone a lot after my grandfather died. I had imaginary playmates and read fairy tales. It wasn't that my mother and father didn't love me. They did, I guess. We just never talked. They raised me as they were raised—nannies, private schools, camps, vacations abroad. You know the routine."

"Well, not exactly. Where I come from the kids were packed off to stay with whoever was laid off or too old to work. I read biographies and played sports. Same scenario, I guess. Different reason."

"I never thought of it that way, but you may be right. Still, we both turned out okay, didn't we?" Except, she decided privately, that she'd bet money Adam hadn't stayed with anybody. He'd probably been totally self-sufficient at five years of age.

Her eyes were adjusting, and she could separate out the cabinet and the sink from the darkness. Nobody understood her motivation, but the elderly people she helped felt they had been abandoned, too, in a different way. And she understood their fears. Helping them was like being with her grandfather. He'd understand.

She was certain Adam had never been afraid of anything, not even as a child. His being alone hadn't seemed to have left any permanent scars. But then maybe it had. Maybe he, too, had found a way to give some of the love he'd been deprived of. He'd just done it in another way. Perhaps there wasn't such a big difference between repairing a broken window or a leaky faucet and fighting crime.

This housing project had been her opportunity to make a real difference. Then Kojak had to come along and muddy the water. He didn't approve of her methods. She wasn't sure he even approved of her. He just liked kissing her. She had to put a stop to that. His arms weren't any different from any other man's. Neither were his lips. But his enslave-the-recipient and keep-her-in-line kind of law enforcement was very effective.

She was just about to suggest that her sleeping bag would make a more comfortable seat than the rocky floor when she heard a man's voice. Adam tensed and she knew he'd heard it too.

"That's no ghost," she whispered.

“Shhhhhh!” Adam carefully pushed himself to his feet, indicating by touching Toni’s shoulder that she should stay put. Cautiously he made his way back into the large room, past the rubbish to a window Annie had washed earlier. The sound of male voices carried clearly through the darkness.

“You bring the money?”

“Yes. What about the zoning permit, Burns?”

“It’s as good as done. I get the zoning changed from housing to industrial at the same time you’re buying options on the property around the Olympic complex site. But what if we don’t get the games?”

“We go for industry, Councilman. We still make a mint. Until you get the zoning changed the land isn’t worth much. Everybody knows the City Council has that land earmarked for low-cost housing. And nobody wants that kind of development with government financing in a mess.”

“Just don’t forget who arranged the zoning change.”

Toni, standing behind Adam, felt her heart sink. She recognized the voice of the first man, the man asking for the money. She ought to. She and half the city of Atlanta had heard it on the cable coverage of the City Council meetings. The man taking a bribe was Richard Burns, a member of the City Council.

No wonder the council was dragging its feet, she thought. One of its most influential members was planning to sell a zoning change. Both her plan and the government housing project would go down the drain if the zoning was changed. That couldn’t be allowed to happen.

She and Adam watched as the figure nearest them handed a small paper bag to the government official. When the payoff had been completed, Adam drew in a deep breath and stepped through the doorway into the courtyard.

At the same moment a light flooded the area and a voice vibrated through a speaker.

“This is the police. Stop where you are.”

“That’s right, fellows. Hold it right there.” Adam hoped the two men wouldn’t realized that the object in his hand was a plumbing wrench rather than a gun.

“The law?” the second man exclaimed. “You brought the cops, Burns? A setup? You fink!” He dropped his shoulder and plowed into Burns, who stood frozen in the light holding the bag.

The blow sent the older man tumbling to the ground. He cried out with pain and tried to rise, but fell back again. Adam swore as the unknown man raced away, then turned back to check Burns.

A setup? Toni wondered. No, she didn’t think so. She watched as the bad guy made a mad dash for the safety of the woods, ducking around to the side of the building, out of the light.

Not stopping to think, she climbed up the crumbling pile of rock and ran along the roof just above the fleet-footed criminal. If there was one thing she was good at, it was scaring crooks. The only thing she hadn’t counted on was that this crook wasn’t standing still. He was almost at the end of the wall.

“Geronimo!” she called out, leaping desperately off the low-hanging roof toward the

startled man. At the last second he stepped aside. The last thing she remembered was watching the ground rise up to meet her.

“Simple Simon met a pieman.” Adam viciously kicked the tire of the rescue vehicle.

Officer Smith walked up to him. “Pieman? Is that a new street name for a payoff man?”

“No, that’s a name for a stupid police officer who can’t even keep one pint-size outlaw out of trouble. How is she?”

“She’s going to be black-and-blue probably. Otherwise, if her temper is any indication of the state of her health, she’s all right. Just got the wind knocked out of her. You know who we got taking a payoff, don’t you, Captain?”

“Yeah, they told me. Here I am trying to keep one woman from turning this place into housing for the elderly at her own expense, and one of our city fathers is selling the zoning. I can’t believe it. What a mess. Does the mayor know?”

“Yes. He’d like to talk to you when you get away.” Officer Smith shook his head. “You don’t think he was really working undercover, do you?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure as hell going to find out.” Adam squared his shoulders and strode around to the back of the ambulance, where the paramedics were arguing with a pale but angry Toni Gresham.

“I will not go to the hospital for observation,” she was saying. “I’m fine, I tell you. Just have somebody drive me home.”

“Not just yet, Geronimo,” Adam said quietly. “I’m taking you home. We have some serious talking to do about your recklessness.”

“My recklessness? Not by the hair of your chinny, chin chin, Adam Ware.” She spat out the words, clenching her hands into tight little balls. “I didn’t take on two crooks with a plumber’s wrench.”

“You’re angry because I’m doing my job?”

“No, I’m angry because ... because ... Oh, how could you do this, bring the police here? You fink! You planned this to sabotage my project from the beginning.”

Toni knew she was overreacting. None of this was Adam’s fault. Even if he had reported her, he couldn’t have known about a bribery attempt. At least their presence had saved the housing zoning from going commercial. Still, she wanted to scream, to reach out and hit something or somebody. Never in her entire life had she felt such frustration boiling inside.

“Look, lady!” Adam’s low voice was more threatening than a shout. “What do you mean I sabotaged your plan? I came here to tell you about the stakeout.”

She jerked her head up, slinging her blond curls viciously. Sparks seemed to fly as she glared at him.

“You never intended to help in the first place. Play a little basketball with the kids. Talk to the garden clubs. Make public appearances for the mayor. You’re a real help to the little man, Adam Ware. You’re just the mayor’s pimp. I can understand that must be good for your ego, but to deliberately set out to betray us, me, that I can’t believe.”

There was pain in Toni’s voice, and disappointment. Adam wanted both to shake her and take her in his arms and comfort her. Not many people could call him a pimp for



the mayor and get away with it. Nobody else would even try.

“Listen, outlaw,” he began calmly. “I didn’t betray you. Take off those rose-colored glasses and recognize the real world out here. I’m no yes-man for anybody. That’s why I was trying to get you out of here. I found out there was a stakeout on for tonight and I came to warn you. We had no idea that a bribery attempt was going down. That was an extra little benefit.”

She knew he was telling the truth and she knew, too, that she’d been lashing out at him when the real object of her wrath was the system that made the elderly homeless. She couldn’t find a building to renovate because of people like Councilman Burns. In truth, she couldn’t blame Adam for what had happened.

“Maybe my glasses are rose-colored,” she admitted. “Maybe I know that I’m not making a dent in the problems of the elderly, but I’m dealing with them the only way I can. At least I’m doing something. Can you say the same thing?”

He took a long time to answer her. “I don’t know. Come on, let me take you home. We need to talk.”

“Yes, I think we do.”

When he reached down to take her arm, she jerked away. On rubbery legs she managed to get to his van, which he’d pulled inside the courtyard. Stepping up used the last of her energy, and she collapsed against the back of the seat.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m very tired. Adam, what will happen to Councilman Burns?”

“He’s going downtown to talk to the chief. Claims he was approached by someone who offered a bribe for a zoning permit. Of course, honorable man that he is, he couldn’t allow the man to bribe any of the other councilmen, so he set out to catch the crook all by himself.”

“And you believe that?”

“No, but it will be his word against the crook’s, and since nobody knows who the other guy was, dear Councilman Burns will probably get off.”

“Adam, I know who the second man was.”

Adam started the engine and eased the van around the piles off rubbish and into the road. His mind whirled with the implications of Toni’s statement. She knew who the other man was. His first thought was to drive straight downtown, then he reconsidered.

“You recognized him?”

“Well, no, but I did see his face. I could probably identify him if I ever saw him again.” She glanced at Adam, surprised at his stern expression. He was holding the steering wheel the same way he’d held his chili dog, loosely but with complete control.

Adam felt that he was anything but in control. What Toni didn’t know was that that bag had contained a lot of money, and the briber had abandoned it willingly. Anybody willing to shell out that kind of money wasn’t going to like it that Toni could identify him. That is, if he knew. Once that knowledge became part of the police record, it would be public information no matter how much they tried to keep it quiet.

Adam drove through downtown Atlanta, heading north on Peachtree Street, formulating his plan as he drove. “I’m hungry, Toni. What do you say we get a bite to

eat while we talk about it?”

“I think I’m too tired to eat. I just want to go home and decide what I’m going to do.”

“You’re too tired to worry about the Swan Gardens people now. Besides, you haven’t explained about the teacup yet. I’m very interested.”

“I am hungry,” she admitted. Looking from her cutoff jeans to Adam’s uniform, she shook her head. “A police chief and a flower child? Somehow I don’t think we’re dressed for dining out.”

He nodded sheepishly, feeling some of his tension melt away. “I think you’re right. Okay, I have an idea.” He took a right onto Ponce de Leon Avenue, wheeled into Domino’s drive-in window, and turned to Toni, one eyebrow lifted. “You do like pizza?”

“With double cheese and hot pepper?”

“Hot pepper? Do you always live so dangerously?”

“Yes. I never thought much about it, but I guess I do. And so do you, Captain Ware.”

“There are times.” He gave the order to the attendant, drove over to the waiting area, and placed the order number billboard on the top of his van. “Now, tell me more about the teacup.”

“Adam, why are you doing this? We’re about as far apart as Jack Sprat and his wife. He could eat no fat and she could eat no lean. Complete opposites. Just take me home and forget about me. I’ll give up on the prison farm and you can go back to whatever it is that you do.”

“If I recall the rest of that rhyme, outlaw, together they licked the platter clean. Maybe what we ought to do is start over. We might find a mutual platter. I’m willing if you are.”

“I don’t know, Adam, I’m not into show-and-tell. I’m a very private person.”

“After your wet T-shirt act and me stripping practically down to my underwear, I think there’s not much left to show, but I’m game if you are.” He started to unbutton his shirt.

“You know what I mean, Kojak. I just want the truth from you.”

“You do believe that I didn’t set this up tonight, don’t you?” He didn’t know why that was so important to him, but it was.

“Yes, I believe you. I was just angry with the world, with the City Council and the mayor. Let’s not talk anymore about that, Adam. Tell me about you.”

Maybe that was better, he thought, turning the conversation away from her while she got better control of herself. He leaned back and whistled. “Not much to tell. Played enough football in high school to get a scholarship to Jacksonville State in Alabama. At the time I think they took me on to raise the grade-point average of the team. I got lucky, I guess, and did well enough to get picked up by the New Orleans Saints.”

“Annie told me you were a star, said you can still outrun most of the hoodlums on the streets. Why’d you quit?”

“The press explained it as a clothesline tackle by a particularly mean defensive back that put me out of commission. Had to have knee surgery. Afterward? Well, bad knees seemed like a good answer at the time.”

“How’d you get into police work?”

“At first I considered something that would allow me to work with children. It didn’t take me long to figure out that the big salaries for those kinds of jobs came from the affluent North Side. The kids I needed to help didn’t live there. So I went back to school and studied criminology. I wanted to help the people who needed me most, old and young.”

“Exactly my own thoughts on the subject, Captain. You help your way, and I’ll help mine. We’re traveling the same direction, we’re just using different routes.”

Before he could argue, their pizza was delivered. He handed Toni the box and started the van. As he turned back onto Ponce de Leon, Toni spoke up.

“Isn’t this going to be cold before we get to my house?”

“I thought we’d eat at my house. I’ve had about enough of this uniform for the day. Any objections?”

“I guess not,” Toni murmured, then lapsed into a quiet examination of the store along the street. The discussion of uniforms drew her mind back to the bathroom, and to Adam’s rare ability to make the best of a situation. Except for their difference of opinion on the building, he’d finally allowed himself to help. She appreciated his not saying I told you so, even thought she wasn’t ready to admit her own reservations about turning the prison into housing for the elderly.

The drive was short. Adam astonished Toni by pulling into the drive of a small white shingled house with gingerbread trim. Rocking chairs with bright cushions sat on the porch, and the front door had an oval cut-glass design in blues and gold. He parked the van and turned to Toni, a curious expression on his face.

“Well, this is it.”

“Oh, Adam, it’s wonderful. I never would have guessed you live in the Virginia Highlands area. Your house is like the gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel. I love it.”

Her eyes brightened with joy as she took in the exterior of his little house. He didn’t know why he’d brought her there, or what kind of reaction he’d expected. He’d never shared his home with a woman before. This was his place of escape from the ugly world he faced every day. This was the house his mother had never had, the one he’d so desperately wanted as a small boy. It was satisfying to know Toni’s pleasure was as real as his own.

“Where would you have guessed I live?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Some swinging singles complex in one of those apartment buildings with sunken great rooms and a clubhouse. Why this?”

“Because it’s home. Now, no more questions about me, outlaw. Our pizza’s getting cold.”

“You’re right,” she agreed quietly, handing him the box of pizza and sliding out the van. “I want to see the inside.” She wasn’t sure what she was feeling as she stepped up on the porch and waited for Adam to unlock the door. She hesitated a moment as he went inside and stepped back, waiting for her to follow.

Suddenly she was afraid to move. She could see the glowing light off the lamp he’d switched on, reflecting warm and inviting on the polished wood floors. She felt a bit like

Gretel, eager to know what was inside, but afraid to reach out for the unexpected intimacy that the house and the man suggested.

“Well, what are you afraid of?” he asked. “I’m not the Big Bad Wolf, and you’re not Little Red Riding Hood.”

“No, not anymore. I was thinking more of ‘ “Come into my web,” said the spider to the fly.’ ” She laughed at her trepidation. “Why the hell not, Adam. Let’s eat. I’ve got the law to protect me, don’t I?”

“Yes, ma’am, sworn and duly authorized.”

She stepped inside. Adam closed the door and led the way down the hall to the kitchen, his entire body conscious of the woman following behind.

She was right. He was a police officer, with a sworn duty to protect and care for every citizen. There was only one problem. He was off duty. And he wasn’t sure who was going to protect him.

While Adam was changing clothes, Toni glanced around at kitchen walls of warm red bricks and open shelves lined with utensils and cookware from the past. A bay window had been added, making a tiny pocket for a small butcher-block table and chairs. Over the top of the regular windows were small stained-glass inserts, companion pieces to the front door.

“Oh, Adam, this is lovely.”

“You sound surprised.” He walked bare-chested and barefoot back into the kitchen, buttoning a pair of jeans that hung low on his hips.

His beard made a dark shadow across his face and chin, and his hair was ruffled across his forehead. She simply stared at him, her words held captive by the lump in her throat. She was glad Annie wasn’t with them, or she’d be rescuing the pizza from the counter.

“I guess I am surprised,” she finally managed to say. “I mean, you don’t look like the type to collect iron skillet and copper pots. They must have belonged to your mother.”

A flash of pain clouded his eyes for a moment as he pulled a fresh T-shirt over his head and tucked it into his pants. She couldn’t help but think back to the man in the forest, the combat-ready officer wearing fatigues, the man who’d kissed her senseless and then arrested her.

Adam Ware was an enigma. One minute he was Rambo. The next minute he was a Mel Gibson look-alike wearing a uniform that would make any woman’s blood pressure rise. Then, without a trace of embarrassment he’d shucked down to his trousers and become a Chippendale calendar man in the flesh. Now, he was standing in a wonderful country kitchen straight out of *Ladies’ Home Journal*.

He turned to the refrigerator. “No, my mother wasn’t a collector. But I like to think that she would have liked this room. What will you drink? I’m afraid I don’t have any witch’s potion brewed up.”

“Oh, soda, iced tea, water.”

“No beer or wine?”

“Nope. Not that I don’t have my vices, but alcohol isn’t one of them. I’m more into—”

“Breaking and entering,” he interrupted. “Not to mention trespassing, contributing to the delinquency of minors, and inciting to riot.”

He popped the pizza into his microwave and glanced out the window over the sink. “Looks like it’s going to rain. Good thing we didn’t have to spend the night in your new apartment. We’d probably have gotten wet. Set the table, will you?”

His plates were a deep-orange-glazed earthen-ware with a border of dark blue, perfectly coordinated with the two blue and orange napkins he handed to her. As she placed them on the table, he filled matching blue-glazed mugs with ice and opened a large plastic bottle of cola. When the microwave buzzer sounded, he removed the

cardboard box and brought it to the table.

“Such domesticity,” she said, smiling. “I’m impressed. At my house you’re lucky to have hot dogs served on paper plates.”

“I’m not a very good cook,” he confessed as he sat down opposite her. “Truthfully, this is more in the nature of a stage setting.”

She watched as he laid a slice of steaming pizza on both of their plates. She hadn’t allowed herself to look further ahead than eating pizza. “You’re going to bring out the torture light and grill me until I talk?”

“No. As a matter of fact, Toni Gresham, I don’t want to talk about what happened at all. Tomorrow we’ll go downtown and look at the mug books. Tonight we just talk about us, you and me.”

“No more vigilante and policeman?”

“No. Tonight I’m more into fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Talk to me, Goldilocks.” He took a bite of pizza, stringing out the cheese as he chewed lustily.

And she did. She told him about her grandfather, who’d read to her, wonderful stories about Black Beauty and Hans Brinker. About how he’d allowed her to tag along with him to the mill every day during the summer and after school when she entered kindergarten. She loved the large spools of thread and the machines with their vibrant sounds and vivid colors. She loved visiting the mill village, where they would sit on the front steps of the store and drink Kool-Aid and iced tea. Grandfather always had a nursery rhyme or a funny song for the children and a kind word for the parents. They’d been inseparable, the white-haired man and the little girl.

And then one day he’d been taken to the hospital and nobody would tell her why. She’d been seven years old when he died. Her mother thought she was too young to attend the funeral. Neither her mother nor her father had recognized her grief, and she’d been forced to push it to the back of her mind. The mill had closed and the old people had been forced to move. Soon afterward, she’d been sent away to private school.

“But you were such a little girl,” Adam said softly.

“Yes, but my grandfather was very special. He was the only one who ever really cared about me. I loved him and those people loved him too. I was too young to understand that what my parents did was the only thing they could do. The mill equipment was out-of-date and the cost of changing over to modern technology was more than the mill could support.”

“What happened to the people in the mill village?”

“They had to move. There was no money for upkeep. They lost their homes and nobody seemed to care. I swore that when I grew up, I’d make it right.”

“And that’s why you’re so involved in helping the elderly?”

“Yes. I can’t reopen the mill. It’s too late for that. Most of the equipment was sold to pay the debts. So far I’ve managed to convince my parents to keep the property, though I don’t know why. The actual mill has been leased for years. We still have some of the smaller buildings, but sooner or later they’ll have to go too.”

“It must have been hard, seeing it all end.” Hard? he thought. It must have been agony. He was surprised at how easy it was to understand her feelings. And he was

surprised at how much he was beginning to like Toni Gresham.

“Yes, it was hard,” she said. “Most people don’t understand. They think I’m just one of the Sunnyside Food Greshams and that I don’t have any real concerns. I do. Just like you. We aren’t so very different, are we?” she added quietly.

There was an occasional rumble of thunder and a flash of distant lightning as they finished their pizza. Toni washed the dishes and Adam dried. He talked about going to work with his mother before he was in school. She was a maid, and part of his childhood had been spent in some of the luxurious homes on the wealthy North Side of Atlanta. He barely remembered his father. He’d left when Adam was very small. His mother had died when he was in high school. He had been on his own ever since.

There was a curious sense of companionship between them as they wiped off the counter and turned out the light.

“It’s very late, Adam,” Toni said, unable to keep the weariness out of her voice. “Thank you for dinner, but I think you’d better take me home before the storm breaks.”

“I have an extra bedroom,” he said casually with his back to her. “Any chance you’d like to stay here tonight?”

“No, Adam. I don’t think so.”

She knew what he was asking and she knew she had to refuse. They’d started their relationship with kisses and fireworks. Tonight they’d made a start at getting to know each other. She’d told him things she’d never admitted to anybody, not even herself. And she suspected he’d done the same thing. It was too easy to talk with him; it would be too easy to stay. There was something between them, something fragile and not yet defined. Denying that was impossible. But was it real, or a fairy tale?

She had to give him another plus mark. He didn’t try to change her mind and he didn’t touch her, until they reached her teacup door.

“Stay put tomorrow, Toni,” he said simply, “until I can check in downtown and find out where we stand. Don’t answer the phone and don’t leave. Please?”

“All right, Adam. The prison farm plan will have to be scuttled anyway, now that the Mad Dog Squad is on the loose. I’ll wait to hear from you.”

He leaned his hand flat against the wall over her head and looked down at her. “I’m sorry I was so rough on you before, Toni. When I saw you on the ground, out cold, I panicked. Knowing how impulsive you are, I was afraid.... I don’t often do that and I overreacted.”

Adam had really been concerned about her, she thought with amazement. He’d been angry and stern because he was worried. She knew that apologizing wasn’t easy for him either. She was learning that Adam liked action, not words. So did she.

There was a hot stillness in the air, the kind that comes just before the rain. Adam was looking at her as though he regretted being there. She sensed the conflict in him. The silence grew heavy. Even the sounds of the city were muted and dull.

She couldn’t not kiss him, she realized dreamily as she moved into his arms. And it seemed he felt the same way. The kiss was definitely a combined effort.

He began by simply holding her and kissing her hair, touching a finger lightly to her lips before he claimed them with his own. The kiss was what she needed, that and being

held, and she gave herself over to it willingly, as a plant reaches to the sun.

At last he lifted his head, though he still held her lightly in his arms. She smiled.

“I like it when you smile, Toni.”

He kissed her again, and the kiss changed, deepening, reaching into that frightening, uncharted area that neither wanted to know. They were shaken by the pleasure of touching, both giving while each knew there were boundaries beyond which they would not go. Time seemed suspended while they kissed. Adam’s arms and body covered her warmly, while she filled a void in his life that he hadn’t wanted to acknowledge. Neither would forget how good this holding felt.

Adam finally drew back. “Good night, outlaw. Sleep well.”

Her eyes still closed, Toni’s lips curled impishly. Feeling as if she were a small child who’d just been given a treat, she reached behind her, opened the door, and walked—or maybe she floated—into the house.

Adam took his time walking back down the steps. Halfway down he heard the scream.

Tearing back up the steps and into the house, he bit back his censure that she hadn’t locked the door when he saw her face.

She was staring into the kitchen sink, her eyes wide, her skin shockingly white. He followed the line of her gaze and felt the air whoosh out of his lungs. Laid out very carefully, almost as though it were sleeping, was a chicken, a very large, very dead, fully feathered chicken. Both his legs had been cut off.

“Adam.” Toni turned into his arms and pressed herself against him. She felt a low moan escape her lips. “Who would do such a mean, ugly thing?” His arms went around her and she felt comfort in his touch. Resting her cheek against his chest, she gave in to the need to be close.

“Some prankster,” he said confidently. “A student maybe, unhappy with his grade.” He hoped he was doing a better job of convincing her than he was of convincing himself. “You probably left the door open when you left this morning.”

But she hadn’t, he knew. He’d been here, looking for Annie and her, and the door had been locked then. Whoever had left this chicken had done so in the last few hours. It wasn’t even stiff yet. Adam put his analytical training into gear, listening as he held Toni. They were alone now. He was sure of that. But if somebody had gotten in once, he could get in again. Toni was in danger.

“Well, this may not get him a better grade,” she managed bravely, choking back the fear in her throat. “But it will sure as hell get him out of my class.” She allowed herself to be held for just another moment, then pulled away and took a deep breath. “Will you get rid of ... it for me?”

“Sure, as soon as I’ve checked the house.”

She stood in the center of the kitchen, trying not to look in the sink as Adam made a quick check of her little house.”

“Do you have a shovel?” he asked when he returned to the kitchen, satisfied that they were alone.

“No, why?”

“I thought I’d bury the chicken.”



“Why?”

He tried to answer her in a way that didn't sound foolish. “I always bury anything that dies. Birds, cats hit by cars, you know. It just seems the right thing to do.”

Toni's shock drained away as she contemplated Adam's answer. Arresting hardened criminals and burying dead animals. Such a contrast. Strong and soft, she liked that. Damn him, she was liking him more and more, and that frightened her.

“My next-door neighbor,” she said. “There's a little tool shed where he keeps garden equipment. He won't mind if we borrow a shovel.”

“Not we, me. You lock the door behind me and wait here. You're too wiped out to climb back down those stairs again.”

Toni didn't protest. She even locked the door. Turning on the rest of the lights, she sat down on the couch to wait. Always before she'd felt safe in her little house. Now that had changed. Her house had been violated and she didn't know why. Still, she was tough. She'd never let anything get her down before.

By the time Adam rapped on the door and identified himself, she was in control again. She would have thanked him and said good night, but he was soaking wet. The rain was suddenly coming down in torrents.

“Oh, Adam, you're half-drowned.”

“I never do anything halfway, outlaw. I'm totally soaked. And I'm dripping all over your carpet.”

“I'm sorry. It's all my fault. Come inside and—and I'll put your clothes in the dryer. They won't take long.”

Adam hadn't intended to leave the house anyway. This simply gave him an excuse to stay, at least until he'd had time to look around. There was no chance that he could ever squeeze into any of Toni's robes, so he settled for an oversized cotton T-shirt and a sheet wrapped around himself Polynesian style. The dryer was halfway through its cycle and the hot chocolate was just beginning to simmer when lightning struck somewhere close by and the lights went out.

This time Toni didn't scream. She simply froze where she stood. By the time Adam found her in the dark she was shivering. He realized that she wasn't afraid of muggers in the park or spiders under a sink, but the dark paralyzed her. He touched her arm, and she turned to him with desperate urgency.

“Does this happen often?” he asked.

“Sometimes. There's a grounding system built into the foundation, so lightning doesn't strike the house. I keep candles in every room. The darkness is the worst part. I can hear the wind and the creaking of my house. But always before, I knew that no matter what went on outside, I was safe. Now, I don't know.”

“You're safe, darling. I'm here.”

This time when he kissed her, he couldn't seem to hold back. He meant to be gentle, to reassure her. But while he managed to control his hands and his body, his lips turned renegade. They plundered, tasted, and swept across Toni like the storm outside was assaulting the house.

“Toni,” he finally said in a hoarse voice, “I want to stay with you tonight.”

She didn't answer. Instead she slid her arms around him and kissed him hungrily, as though she were afraid this might be the last time they'd ever be together. He'd invaded her life, gotten past her mass of followers, and isolated her in his arms. Nobody had ever done that before. She'd always loved her teacup. Now she knew it really was magic.

"I want you to stay," she said at last.

Adam let out a sigh of relief. He'd meant that he wanted to protect her. Yet now that she had agreed, he knew his wanting was more than just to protect the woman he was holding in his arms. She was so tiny, so trusting, so right, and he gave in to the need to protect and hold her.

"You lock up, Adam," she said, pulling reluctantly from his arms, "while I get a shower. Then ...". Her voice trailed off as she saw the war of emotions on his face.

"I think I'd better sleep on the couch, Toni, in case the prankster comes back."

Another bolt of lightning spilt the sky, followed by a thunderous boom.

"Adam Ware, if you intend to comfort me at all, you're going to have to be closer than the couch. Oh, Adam, hold me."

Then she was in his arms again. Their bodies were touching. The always present sizzle surged out of control between them, and she felt the throb of his arousal against her hip. He pulled her closer, settling her into the hollows where she fit.

"Are you sure, Toni? I want you to know that I don't do this kind of thing often," he said slowly. "And I want this to be more than just because you're afraid of the dark."

"I'm not afraid of the dark, Adam, not now with you with me."

"Toni ..."

Picking her up, he strode into the bedroom, dropping his toga as he walked. He laid her on the bed and peeled off his T-shirt, then hers. Lowering himself down beside her, he gathered her in his arms. Her nipples were pressed against his chest like heated magnets, and he felt the soft underside of one breast rise and fall against his arm as she breathed. He forced himself to speak. "Toni, are you protected?"

"Am I ... Oh! Oh, Adam, I'm sorry. I didn't think. I mean I don't ...". She squirmed, embarrassment flooding her with a different kind of heat.

He groaned. "I'm sorry too. I told you that I don't do this often. I don't have anything with me either. But that's all right, darling. I'll just stay with you and hold you. Sometimes that's enough. Time enough for more later. Let me rub your back and you go to sleep."

"Oh, Adam," she sighed, throwing her leg across his thigh. "You'll really hold me without ...? Thank you." This time her sigh was one of contentment. "You won't leave me, will you?"

"I won't leave you." He rubbed her back, just as his mother had rubbed his when he was a boy. He wondered why she was afraid that he'd go, then he wondered why he was afraid that he didn't. For a long time she held herself stiff and tight, then as sleep claimed her, he felt the uncoiling of her tension. Her breathing became relaxed and even. The night passed as she slept, safe from whoever left the mutilated chicken as a warning. For Adam was certain that was the intention.

As dawn broke over the horizon he slid from her grasp and left the house in the sky.

At least Toni had had a good night's sleep, even if he hadn't closed his eyes.

Caught by the last deep fingers of sleep, Toni sighed and willed herself not to wake. She was being kissed. Adam was kissing her. She'd dreamed about his kisses, over and over through the night until she was hot and wet from wanting him. She felt him shift, then pull his lips away from hers and trail them down her body, capturing her nipple and turning her into a trembling mass of desire.

His leg was threaded intimately between hers. She could feel his wiry body hair stimulating her thigh. He ran his fingers across her lower back, curving around her bare buttocks and sliding into the warm, secret place between her legs.

Her body was singing with energy. A roaring began in her head, and from somewhere deep beneath his touch an uncontrollable quivering vibrated through her.

"Toni darling, open your eyes. Are you ready to love me now?"

"Ready? Oh, yes, Adam darling, I'm ready." She opened her eyes. Her dream was real. Adam was leaning over her, his dark eyes intense with desire. It was natural to turn so that he had easy access to her. She exhaled slowly and closed her eyes again as he captured her other breast with his hot, stroking tongue.

"I hope so, Toni, because I don't think I can wait much longer." His mouth left her breasts and tasted and pulled at her body as he moved leisurely down, closer and closer —

"Adam! What are you doing?" Fully awake, Toni tried to sit up. Her eyes opened wide at the sight of the sunlight spilling over the bed, and the man posed over her, resplendently naked and thoroughly aroused.

He smiled gently at her. "I'm about to do what your body has been begging me to do for the last half an hour. You want me inside you, outlaw, you want to feel me deep inside you."

"I do?"

"That's what you said. That and a few other things that we'll talk about later when I'm sure you're awake."

"I'm awake, Adam, I really am." Her breath exploded from her as she felt the tip of him pressing against her. His eyes were hooded. His breath came quick and hot as he leaned forward, supporting his body on his elbows, letting himself rest against her. Confused, dazzled, she felt her body confirm her desire by lifting itself to him.

"Wait. Last night," she whispered. "You said we'd have to wait until another time." She caught her breath and realized she was urgently stroking his upper arm.

"This is the other time, darling. I ..." He hesitated. "I slipped out early this morning and made a quick trip to the all-night pharmacy. I didn't want to take a chance on there not being an 'in the morning.' "

"Oh, Adam, you take care of everything, don't you. I love it that you're so controlled, but there are times when you're much too slow." Her hips arched up, and he wasn't slow anymore.

It wasn't a dream. It was real and Toni gave herself over to this wild, passionate man with total abandon. She cried out as sensation after hot sensation swept over her, until she felt his violent shudder and knew they'd flown to the sun and back. Afterward she

clung to him, sharing the wonder of their coming together.

Adam gathered her to him, closed his eyes, and slept. When he woke up, she was gone. He tied the sheet around his lower body and went in search of her, walking straight into Annie and Fred, who were sitting at the table drinking coffee with Toni.

“Good morning,” he said with a half-smile, then put his private reservations aside and kissed Toni soundly.

“Personally,” Annie said, “I’d give the tension in here a three, Fred. Pressure’s dropped a little. The milk’s still safe for now.” She smiled broadly at Adam and handed him a cup.

“Yeah,” Fred agreed. “Adam man, your presence here may mean happiness for Toni dear, but about your dress, I’ll have to confess—you’re a leftover sixties mess.”

Adam tucked his sheet tighter and sat down.

“Oh, your clothes are dry,” Toni said. “Adam got soaked last night,” she went on in a rush, her face flaming red. “In the rain.”

“Oh, yeah, it rained downtown too,” Annie said. “Sometime late last night. Very late.”

It was time to take charge. Adam sat his coffee cup down and said, “Okay, you three. What are you plotting?”

“Nothing, Adam, darling,” Toni answered with a stern look at Annie and Fred. “I’ve just given them the bad news about our having to scrub the prison farm and find another place for the Swan Gardens people.”

Adam frowned. “I thought you’d given up on that idea, Toni.”

“Not the idea, just the location. We’ve already started scouting around. Any suggestions?”

“The only suggestion I have is that you three stay put while I check in downtown. I promised the chief I’d make a full report today.”

“Fine, I’m having lunch with my parents,” Toni said. She took a deep breath. “And I don’t look forward to that.”

“Why is that, Toni?” Annie asked curiously.

“Because it’s always such a strain. They don’t know what to say to me and I just sit there waiting for something bad to happen. Forget that. I just don’t have the time to waste right now.”

“Lunch with your parents,” Adam repeated. “That will work out just right. Fred, will you and Annie stick around until she’s ready to go, and maybe drive her over? I’ll pick her up and bring her back.”

“Nonsense,” Toni said. “I don’t need a bodyguard, Adam. What’s the matter, are you afraid I’ll commandeer another site?”

“No, I’m afraid you’ll get on your broom and fly away.” He rose lazily, glanced at Fred and Annie as though making up his mind, then gave her a wickedly suggestive kiss before sauntering toward the bedroom. “The only flying you’re going to do is with me. I’d better get dressed.”

“Good idea,” Annie said. “I don’t know how much the milk can take.”

“And you think the chicken was a warning?”

Fred was leaning against Adam’s van, a worried expression on his face. He’d followed

Adam outside.

“That’s exactly what I think. She’s the only one who got a good look at the man paying off Councilman Burns. I don’t buy his story that he was working undercover for one minute, and I don’t think anyone else will either. But he’ll get away with it because we won’t be able to prove otherwise.”

“Think the bad guy will want his money back?”

“Do you mean, will he go after Burns? I doubt it. The last thing he wants right now is any public kind of connection to what happened. No, it’s Toni he’s worried about.”

“So, what will you do, man?”

“I’m going to move into her house for a while.”

Fred’s eyes narrowed as he studied Adam intently. “You aren’t making a move on her just to protect her, are you? Since I’ve known her, you’re the first man she’s ever let stay over. I don’t think I’d want to see her hurt.”

“I won’t hurt her, Fred. I know what happens when a man uses a woman and leaves her.”

Fred nodded and smiled. “Okay, I believe you. Go make your report and we’ll be Snow White’s dwarfs till you get back. By the way, what kind of house do you live in?”

“Toni said it was made of gingerbread.”

“Gingerbread? I should have known. I just hope you two haven’t opened Pandora’s box.”

“Pandora’s box? Fred, I didn’t know you were a learned man.” Adam climbed into his van and gave Fred a warm smile.

“Oh, I’ve read a thing or two.” Fred put his hand across the frame of the open van window. “Seriously, Adam, I’ve also read about Humpty Dumpty. And you know how that ended.”

“You’re wrong,” Adam said quietly. “Toni didn’t sit on a wall, she climbed. She didn’t fall, Fred, she jumped. And she’s still in one piece. Keep her that way.”

“Maybe,” Fred mumbled under his breath as Adam drove away. “But being a police officer is about as close as you could come to being one of the king’s men.”

“I’ve always suspected that Burns skated close to the edge, Adam,” the mayor said. “And I’m worried about Miss Gresham. Burns swears the man was just a voice on the phone. He’s still looking at the mug books now.” The mayor was distressed, as Adam had known he would be.

“What happens if he spots the guy?”

“We make a deal. The middleman’s off the hook if he tells us who’s behind the bribes. Then we go after the man at the top. This has to be tied in with bringing the Olympic Summer Games to Atlanta in 1996. The old prison isn’t part of the plan, but it is adjacent to the proposed Olympic housing facilities. The site committee won’t release its choice for the games until the fall, but I don’t intend to let Atlanta be compromised.”

“Still, it doesn’t make sense, sir. Buying zoning is a white-collar crime. But a chicken in her sink? That sounds like voodoo or black magic.” Adam couldn’t deny that he was worried, too, more than he was ready to admit to Toni or Fred.

“True, that’s why I want you to stay with Miss Gresham. Consider yourself on special

assignment to help her locate this building she's intent on refurbishing. That way you can keep an eye on her and make certain there are no attempts to use her as insurance."

"I think I can manage that, Mayor. Any news on vacant buildings that might be available for her project?"

"No, but I've arranged an extension for the Swan Gardens changeover. They've agreed to give the residents six months instead of sixty days."

Adam grinned. "How'd you manage that?"

"I have a little influence down at city hall," the mayor said, and stood, indicating the interview was ended.

Adam had already opened the door when the mayor's voice stopped him. "By the way, Adam, why aren't you in uniform?"

Adam looked down at his wrinkled jeans and shook his head. "Don't ask, sir. You really wouldn't believe it if I told you."

The mayor was right about one thing anyway, Adam decided as he drove out of the parking garage. He'd have to stop by his house and change clothes. He didn't know whether the Greshams had ever had a police officer as a luncheon guest before, but he wanted to make a good impression.

At a quarter after twelve he stopped at the well-known wrought-iron gate that guarded the entrance to the Gresham estate and dismissed the waiting Fred and Annie. It hadn't been until he'd seen the gate again that he realized he'd been there before, with his mother on one of her day jobs. Ironic, he thought, how he'd come full circle.

The gate attendant refused to admit him until he showed his badge. Even then, it took a phone call to the house before the gates were unlocked and Adam's van was allowed inside. Maybe Toni ought to move back home for a while, he mused. She'd be much safer here than in her own house.

"Adam, what are you doing here?" Toni asked as she opened the door. "Fred could have taken me ..." Her voice trailed off as she stared at the man in the doorway. This wasn't the Rambo Adam, nor the Mel Gibson Adam. This was the kind of casual young-executive type that her parents would approve of. Now why had that popped into her mind? What her parents approved of had never mattered before.

He was wearing a pair of navy cotton pants, a red polo shirt, and docksiders. But the preppy look would never erase the camouflage fatigues and olive-drab T-shirt he'd worn the first night. In fact, she conceded without argument that anything he wore was pure sacrilege. Standing naked in a flash of lightning was where he belonged. However, she decided with a grin that made Adam lift an eyebrow, the toga would be a close second.

"The mayor sent me," he said. "May I come in?"

"Why?"

"He's arranged a six-month-extension for your Swan Gardens people".

"I warn you, coming in here amounts to being invited to lunch with the Spanish Inquisition."

"I'm ready, outlaw. What happened to your hair?"

She was dressed in a bright red sundress with a lavender sash and matching lavender sandals. Red plastic earrings dangled to her shoulders, and her blond munchkin curls

were spiked into a semipunk look that he knew drove her parents wild.

"I just used a little bit of mousse," she said. "Mother hates it."

"Hmm. If I'd thought about it, I would have stopped by your hairdresser's and bought myself a few spikes for courage."

"I don't think you need it," Toni said, and stepped back to allow him inside. This time her smile was one of inner pleasure. He hadn't objected to her punk hairdo. Instead, he'd understood.

"Toni," a woman called, "bring your policeman in and introduce us."

"Your policeman?" Adam whispered. "I like that." He took her hand and gave her a moon-eyed look. "I do like that, outlaw."

She jerked her hand away. "Don't get any ideas, Kojak. I had to tell them something. They don't know about the prison farm yet. They know the Burnses socially. I haven't had a chance to tell them about the bribery attempt."

"Don't tell them. I don't like letting the lizard off, but with any luck, they might not have to know. By the way, are we engaged or just living together?"

"Neither. We're just ... friends."

"That too," he said, and gave her a quick but totally wicked kiss.

Toni managed to battle back the urge to drag Adam off to an upstairs bedroom and led him into the dining room instead. "Mother, Father, this is Captain Adam Ware. The mayor has assigned him to me. We're working on a project together."

Mr. Gresham gazed at Adam with shrewd interest. "Adam Ware, the ex—running back for the Saints?"

Adam bit back a groan and gave the expected reply. He'd played this game before. "Yes, sir, Mr. Gresham, Mrs. Gresham. I'm happy to meet Toni's parents."

"You're assisting the mayor, Toni?" Mrs. Gresham asked. "The kind of public-spirited attitude the Greshams have always been involved in? That's good, dear. What kind of project are you assisting the mayor with?"

"I'm not working *with* the mayor, Mother. I'm working with the people who live in the Swan Gardens apartments. They're being forced out of their homes. I was just telling you about it when Adam arrived. You remember, *that dreary housing project?*"

Mrs. Gresham started, then recovered as she said, "But you didn't tell me the mayor thought it was a good idea. We're so pleased to have you join us, Captain. Won't you sit down?"

"The mayor doesn't think it's a good idea, Mother. Neither does Adam."

Adam recognized that Mrs. Gresham's comment had been an awkward but sincere attempt to appear interested. Mr. Gresham, who had been listening to the exchange, unfolded his napkin and picked up his fork. Adam quickly realized that the Greshams didn't talk with each other. They talked to each other, but they didn't listen. By the time the meal was finished he had a pretty good idea why Toni lived in a teacup and spouted nursery rhymes.

Her attempts to discuss with her parents her project, her teaching, or even her relationship with him fell on deaf ears or were met with sincere bewilderment. Eventually Toni cut short her explanations and after a time, gave up talking altogether.

Both she and Adam picked at their fresh salmon and jellied consommé in silence. They refused dessert, sipping their iced tea until Mr. and Mrs. Gresham finished.

"This is a lovely house," Adam said at last, trying to find some final topic that would ensure a positive response.

"Yes," Mrs. Gresham said in her cool yet surprisingly shy way. "We bought it several years ago from the Bransons. You are familiar with Branson Candies, aren't you?"

"Yes," Adam said. "As a matter of fact, I knew both the Bransons. I particularly like their Japanese garden," he added casually. "The goldfish pond is my favorite spot."

"You're familiar with our gardens?" Mrs. Gresham couldn't contain her astonishment. "Oh, my, that sounds dreadful, doesn't it? I'm sorry. I always seem to say the wrong thing, don't I, Toni?"

Mrs. Gresham gave a nervous little laugh and looked at her daughter with veiled hope in her eyes. When Toni didn't answer, Adam realized this scene wasn't new. He didn't miss Mr. Gresham's quietly touching his wife's hand under the guise of placing his napkin on the table.

"Yes," Adam said, "I played there once as a child."

"Do I know your parents, Mr. Ware?" She looked at him curiously.

"I doubt it, Mrs. Gresham." He gave Toni a private wink. "My mother was Mrs. Branson's maid."

"Oh, I'm doing it again. I'm sorry."

She wasn't. "Mrs. Branson was a kind and generous employer to a woman with a small boy."

Toni felt a curious weight roll away. Adam not only understood her mother, he wasn't intimidated by her. She bit back a warm smile and stood up. "Sorry to eat and run, Mother, but Adam and I have plans to make." She took his hand and pulled him up beside her, adding in an oversweet voice, "Don't we, darling?"

"Indeed we do, darling," he agreed. "Very nice meeting you." This time it was Mrs. Gresham who received a conspiratorial wink as he slid his arm around Toni's waist and asked in a loud whisper, "Your place or mine?"

There was no mistaking Toni's gasp or Mrs. Gresham's smothered smile. For once, Toni realized, she'd gotten some kind of expression of approval from her mother. She enjoyed every second of the silence that fell over the dining area as she and Adam walked down the hall and out of the house. Once outside, Toni let out a peel of laughter loud enough to catch the attention of the guard, who poked his head out of the doorway to his little house.

"Adam, you were wonderful. Was your mother really a maid here?"

"Yes, she was. Are your parents really so hard to talk to all the time?"

"Yes, they are."

"No wonder you live in the sky. I might take up make-believe myself if I'd had to live here. Maybe, outlaw, you intimidate them. I don't think they understand you."

"Well, the feeling is mutual, I assure you. What did the mayor say?"

"That I should move into your house and spend every waking moment making mad, passionate love to you."



“I don’t believe you. Did he really say that?”

“No, that’s my idea. What he actually said was that I should spend every minute with you until you find housing for those old people.”

He opened the door to his van and helped her inside. “What do you think, outlaw?”

She dropped her eyes shyly. “I think I like both ideas.”

This time it was Adam’s whoop of joy that brought the guard completely out of the house, his gun drawn.

“Adam, why wouldn’t you let me tell them about Richard Burns?”

“The mayor thinks it would be better not to let that become public information just yet.”

“How do you expect to keep it quiet?”

“It was arranged for the head of the Mad Dog Squad to confirm that Burns was working undercover. Even if it does get out, he can say he was only doing his job.”

“Well, I don’t think he ought to get away with it,” Toni said. “Once you catch whoever is responsible, I intend to blow the whistle on the old crook, even if he is my father’s friend. It’s time for him to retire anyway, and the city needs somebody on the council who has its best interests at heart.”

Adam held back his honest reaction. He’d seen this go on before. Burns would probably get off without punishment. He was a member of the good-old-boy network. There’d always been political corruption, and Toni’s idealism wasn’t likely to change that. Still, in order to protect her, he’d agreed to go along, at least until they found out who the kingpin was.

“Once we find the man behind the deal,” he said, “you can call out your vigilantes and tar and feather him. I’ll even help you do it.” He opened the passenger door of the van for her. “Where to now, outlaw?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Adam. I haven’t a clue about another building we could use. Fred, Annie, and I drove around all morning before they dropped me off at my parents’ house. We didn’t see anything that looked good. I’m depressed.”

So much for the idea that Toni had given up on a building, Adam thought as he started the van. Still, she looked anything but depressed. In her red sundress and lavender sandals she made him think of a little girl on her way to a birthday party.

“I take it you don’t intend to give up?” He gave the security guard a thumbs-up sign and drove out onto Riverside Drive. “I’d hoped that you and I might spend some time together, go to the beach maybe.”

“Oh, Adam, I’m sorry. I’d love to go away with you, but not now. I’m not giving up on a building. Just think what it would mean.” She grew more excited as she spoke. Adam tried not to see that the excitement was for her project, not for their trip.

“Nope.” She caught his arm and turned a warm, positive smile on him. “These people are going to have someplace to live that they can afford, if I have to build it myself.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that. Well, if you can’t squeeze the beach into your schedule, how about going to a basketball game with me?”

“I really don’t have time, Adam. I need to go to the school and get on the phone. We only have six months, remember? Maybe some other time.”

Adam could see that any relationship with Toni would have to involve her charity projects. He was beginning to appreciate the complaints of the policemen’s wives.

“Well, then,” he said, throwing out his last hope, “we can stop by the tax office on the way.”

“What’s happening at the tax office?”

“The possibility that there might be a building being sold for nonpayment of taxes.”

“What good will that do us? Materials I can get donated, money to buy a building I don’t have.”

“I have to tell you, Toni, that as much as I hate to use my name, raising money is one thing I might be able to help you with. Anyway, you never know. It wouldn’t hurt to check.”

Toni looked down at her hand. Without thinking, she’d slid it down Adam’s arm until their fingers were laced together. There was something comforting about that. Her own hand was small and rough. Adam’s, lightly tufted with dark hair, was big and strong. There was no question he made her feel good. She was beginning to like having him around, even though his comments often dampened her enthusiasm.

They didn’t agree about what she was doing, yet she was beginning to see that he might be right about the impracticability of her plans. Somehow that was disturbing. She didn’t want to align herself with someone who accepted the status quo, even if he did work against it. She wanted to make things different. He only wanted to make them better.

She glanced at her watch and back at Adam. She’d go. If he offered to help her out, she wouldn’t turn him down. At the moment she was turning around in circles. Only a tiny twinge of guilt nagged at her logic. Was she agreeing with Adam because she wanted the man, or his help?

For a long moment they simply gazed at each other. The adoring look in his eyes melted away the last of her resistance. She hadn’t allowed herself to think about what had happened between them, channeling her energies to the tenants of the Swan Gardens instead. But the afterglow of their lovemaking was still there. Once she gave in to that knowledge, she would have agreed with almost anything Adam said. Besides, the expression on her mother’s face when she’d learned that her luncheon guest was the son of a former maid had been delicious.

Toni wondered if her mother and father had ever shared the joy that Adam had given to her. They must have sometime. After all, she was living proof that they’d been together. But her mother was always so distant. Toni had never known her to discuss anything personal. Still, she knew her mother wasn’t really a snob and didn’t mean to be unkind. She just didn’t know any other way of life.

Toni’s father wasn’t any more open. They were anachronisms, throwbacks to another time. They loved Toni in their own way. They simply had no idea how to show it. It was still hard for Toni to believe that her warm, story-telling grandfather had a son so totally different from himself.

Though Adam tried, the tax office was no help. Toni quickly realized that Adam was held in high regard by the tax collectors, who agreed to do some further looking. She was the outsider. From their curious looks it was obvious the employees weren’t accustomed to seeing Adam with anybody like Toni, and it was more obvious that they

viewed her with great skepticism.

“Thanks anyway, Adam,” she said as they left the hall. “Now, where is this basketball game?”

“At the Boys’ Club. I have a little group that I work with most afternoons. If enough players turn up, we divide into teams and play a game. Otherwise, it’s just a scrimmage.”

“What do you mean, ‘turn up’?”

“The boys mean well, but I have to fight the drug dealers, juvenile hall, and sometimes their parents for them. It’s an ongoing struggle to keep them clean and involved.”

“How old are these kids?”

“Anywhere from six to twenty-six, depending on who went to school and who’s out of jail. I’m afraid my teams aren’t what you’d call Pop Warner candidates.”

“Why not work with one of the leagues? At least those kids are officially organized and interested in playing. Wouldn’t it be more rewarding to have a real team?”

“You mean with real uniforms, real referees, and a schedule?”

“Yeah. Like my scout troop.”

“Toni, these kids don’t even have addresses. Ask for birth certificates? Forget it. There’s no way we could meet the requirements to play in the leagues you’re talking about. Besides, I’ve got no guarantee that half the team won’t come in so spaced out, they can’t even play.”

“Why do you do it, Adam, spend your time working with kids like that?”

“Because I was one of those kids, Toni.” His voice was stiff and a bit angry. He didn’t understand her statement. What was the difference between what she was doing and his project? She was working with the less fortunate, the needy. The difference, he realized, was that Toni expected success and often enjoyed a certain amount of it. He only hoped for some, and often found little.

*I was one of those kids.* Toni thought about Adam’s quiet admission as he pulled into the parking area adjacent to a graffiti-marked building. There had been raw pain in his voice. She felt ashamed, thinking about what it must have been like for him growing up, heading for this place after school when she’d been heading for the Zesto Ice Cream Parlor or the shopping mall.

If she thought her reception at city hall was cool, it was a heat wave compared with the icy treatment she received from the basketball players gathered beneath the net-bare hoop in the gym. Adam introduced her, stationed her on the bleachers, and turned to his waiting players.

“All right, guys, are we ready to play?”

“Nah, man,” one longtime member said in a tired voice. “E.T. got busted with a hot stereo and Leno got himself a job running numbers for the Iceman. We’re two players short.”

Adam let out a deep sigh. He’d hoped he might be making some positive impression on the kid they’d nicknamed E.T., but apparently not enough. He’d look into the arrest later. Maybe he could get him off with probation. If Leon had gone with Iceman, he was

lost. "Sorry, guys. Maybe we'll just scrimmage. I need the workout."

"We've been messing around all morning," a skinny, freckle-faced kid said. "We want to play a real game." He dribbled the basketball in a circle. "You could play, Adam."

An older player took a lazy shot. "We'd still be one short, man."

"What about letting me fill in?" Toni called out from her seat on the bleachers.

"A *lady*?" The players looked at her in disbelief.

"Why not?" Adam asked. "You play with me and I'm a *man*."

"Yeah, but you're a jock."

"What's the matter, guys, are you chicken?" Standing up, Toni put her hands on her hips and rolled back and forth on the balls of her feet.

"Okay," the freckle-faced kid said with a sneer. "If you're willing to take a chance on her, Captain, she'll have to be on your team. We get Tree, you get the broad."

"Fine." Adam eyed Toni with amused concern. "I hope you know what you're doing, Toni. These guys are totally serious about this game."

"So am I."

A half an hour later Adam found out that Toni was just as dedicated to her ball playing as she was to her housing project. What she lacked in skill she made up for in determination. After an uncertain beginning, the boys quickly found out that Toni Gresham had a killer instinct and a mean hook shot. If they double-teamed Adam, Toni got the basket. If they concentrated on Toni, Adam got free.

The score seesawed back and forth for most of the game until Toni finally began to tire and the boys went ahead. A mean skid on the floor gave Toni a new scrape on the knee that already had a scab, and Adam brought the session to an end.

"Sorry about calling you a broad," the freckle-faced boy said shyly. "You're all right, Toni."

"Yeah," the others agreed. "Good game, Captain." When they offered their hands in a high five, they extended the camaraderie to Toni as well.

As they drove away from downtown, Adam glanced at Toni. Her face was streaked with eye makeup, and she was stoically nursing an angry wood burn on her knee. Injured, tired, totally disheveled, she was about the most appealing woman he'd ever seen.

He hadn't yet allowed himself to face the reality of making love to Toni. He didn't want to consider what it might mean to her, or to him. It had happened. He'd allowed it to happen, even after he'd turned away from her. She'd trusted him, slept in his arms all night.

Even now he didn't understand why he'd left her house to buy precautions. It hadn't been just because he'd been crazy with wanting her. Control was something he'd learned and perfected. It had been more than desire he'd felt. She was so tiny and so brave. He wanted to protect her. All day he'd refused to examine those feelings. She was wrong for him. He was wrong for her. Yet even now he wanted to pull over to the side of the road and take her into the back of his van and ... He swerved too close to the car in the next lane and jerked the wheel back to the right.

They drove in silence for a while. Yet the silence wasn't awkward. It was a

comfortable sharing of companionship. He cut through the back entrance that bordered on the country club golf course and entered Toni's Sherwood Forest subdivision.

"You all right, Adam?" Toni realized they hadn't spoken, and she wondered if he was angry that she'd intruded on the basketball game.

"I'm fine. You?"

"Fine. Thanks for letting me play."

"Thanks for helping out. You're a good player."

"Just another one of those things that annoys my mother. Greshams swim, play bridge and tennis, not softball and basketball."

"I can see where you must have been a real trial to your mother." He reached out and took her hand. Touching her seemed to be as natural as smiling at her, and he found himself doing that constantly. If his fellow officers could see him now, they'd swear he'd been into the stash in the evidence room. Adam Ware had never had a reputation for being lighthearted.

He released her and reached inside his pocket, retrieving his cigar. He jabbed it into his mouth, rolling it around uncomfortably.

Toni leaned back against the door and studied him. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" Adam wasn't sure why he had pulled back. Maybe it was because he was thinking about his mother. He found it difficult to talk about her. They'd been very close, planning his future, looking forward to the time when she wouldn't have to work so hard. He'd buy her a little house, move her out of Cabbage Town, and help the people who lived the kind of life he had.

During his senior year he'd accepted the scholarship with Jacksonville State. But by then she wasn't there to share it and he'd never felt quite right about his life. He'd gone a little wild for a while, until he'd gotten hurt. The injury had jerked him up and reminded him of the future and his plans to help others.

He played for the Saints until he reinjured his knee, then he retired and went back to college. While he'd been a player there'd been a woman, a woman who quickly decided she wouldn't like being either a student's wife now or a policeman's wife later. Their engagement had come to an end along with his athletic career. He had become a dedicated, serious man with no plans ever to allow himself to be close to anybody. He didn't fit anywhere and he'd learned to accept that.

"Why do you chew on that cigar?" Toni asked.

"Nasty habit, huh?"

"Well, I've known people with worse."

"I don't know. Works out my frustrations, I guess. Like your nursery rhymes." He pulled the van up in front of her house and cut off the engine.

"Do you realize I haven't spouted a rhyme all day long? I think," she said shyly, "that I've found a better outlet for my frustrations." She took the cigar from his mouth and threw it out the window.

"You have?"

"Come with me and I'll show you."

The teacup was quiet and still, as though a spell had been cast over it. As Adam locked

the door behind them, Toni went into the bedroom and began to brush the moussed spikes from her hair. She watched him as he came up behind her, sliding his arms around her waist and kissing the side of her neck.

“You’re right, outlaw. My lips are telling me that this is a definite improvement.”

“Oh, Adam, are we real? Am I truly here with you, like this?”

He pressed his lips against her cheek as his hands rose to her shoulders. Catching the straps of her sundress, he slipped them off. His fingers found the back zipper and pulled it down, allowing the dress to fall to the floor in a splash of color. Her panties followed and she was nude. He raised his head and looked in the mirror, seeing the flush on her face and the wonder in her eyes.

“You are very real,” he whispered in a voice that measured several notes below hoarse. “Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?”

They watched in the mirror as her nipples began to stiffen. Adam’s erection pressed against her, and the beat of his heart matched her own. There was a lopsided grin on his face as he reached around and cupped one of her breasts in his palm. He began to massage the soft globe, touching, examining it as though he’d never seen a woman before.

She blushed. “I’m not very big.”

“You’re absolutely perfect. Just look at us. Look how well we fit together.”

The muscles in Toni’s stomach were having an anxiety attack, and she knew that in another minute she wouldn’t be able to keep still.

“I think,” she managed to say, “that there’s something wrong with this picture.”

“Oh, what’s that? It looks good to me.” Adam could have said it felt good, too, because Toni was like silk. She was warm and alive and he wanted to sweep her off her feet and plunge into her, hard and rough and ... Damn, what was he thinking? Toni was little, delicate. She deserved to be treasured and adored, not ravished.

“You still have all your clothes on,” she said. Twisting around in his arms, she unfastened his belt, unzipped his pants, and reached inside.

“Oh, Toni.” He took in a big breath of air. “Don’t do that.”

She slid his slacks and briefs down his legs in a quick jerk before returning her attention to the part of him that didn’t care about his decision to hold back on the ravishment.

“I want to look at you,” she said. “Touch you. This morning I was so ... aroused, I didn’t have a chance to do this. Are you shy, Adam Ware?”

“Shy? I don’t know. Maybe I am.” He groaned. “I mean, maybe I was. Oh, Toni, you’d better stop that. I don’t seem to have any control at all around you.”

“Good. I like you wild and wanton.”

“Me? Wild and wanton?” He let out a roar. “You got it, outlaw.”

And she did. When Adam loved her, he didn’t hold back. She met him thrust for hungry thrust, soaring through a primeval jungle of desire that took them to the beginning of time and slung them into the future. Afterward Adam lay on his back, holding Toni on top of him. He’d never felt such happiness.

“What are you thinking, Adam?” Toni asked hesitantly, and she held her breath as she

waited for his reply.

“You’re right, outlaw. This beats a cigar any day.”

She stiffened. She hadn’t known how badly she wanted him to say that he loved her until he didn’t. She hadn’t allowed herself to formulate the words, but she knew they’d been there all along. For a long time she lay still, feeling him breathe, feeling his heart beat in a slow, even sound that echoed in her ear.

Maybe he didn’t know how special this was for her, she mused. She was certain that as a jock and a police officer, he’d had hundreds of women chasing him. She’d had several semiserious relationships herself, but none in a long time and never like this.

Adam felt Toni’s sudden distance and he didn’t know what had happened. He sensed she needed reassurance, but wasn’t sure what to say. Intimate talk had never been easy for him. Up to now, he and Toni had fought, disagreed, and faced off against each other’s philosophy of life. Still, they’d seemed so perfectly attuned that each had understood the other’s thoughts and words without explanation. He nuzzled her forehead. He didn’t want to lose this special closeness.

“What’s wrong, Toni?”

“Nothing, Adam. I’ve never seduced a man like this before. I feel like I’m fifteen. This is really crazy, isn’t it? What would *Cosmopolitan* magazine say about me?”

Never seduced a man? That wasn’t the way he had interpreted what they’d done. To him they’d made love and it had been very special. He couldn’t give voice to his feelings just yet. They were too new and perhaps too unwanted. He’d never intended to fall in love.

The pressures of his kind of job played havoc with a woman’s mind. He’d seen too many of his men let their problems at home mess up their ability to carry out their jobs. He’d also seen the job screw up a man’s mind so much, he couldn’t go home at night and be a husband and father. Maybe Toni’s way of looking at what had happened was better.

“*Cosmo* would say that it isn’t terribly unusual for a woman to become attracted to a police officer. We represent both security and danger. The combination often becomes an aphrodisiac to a woman and a man when they’re forced together, particularly when the two people are complete opposites. A sexual attraction isn’t unusual under the circumstances.”

A sexual attraction? Toni thought. Was that the way Adam saw their lovemaking? Her courage left her. “I see. What you’re saying is that we’re complete opposites, that this relationship is purely sexual and should be considered temporary?”

“Something like that, I guess.” Though he agreed verbally, his arm tightened protectively around her, and his fingers worked their way between their bodies until he could cup her breast. What he was saying wasn’t what he was feeling.

Toni felt the trembling in Adam’s touch. She also felt him harden again, pressing against her in a protest that spoke louder than his words. Adam wasn’t a man of impulses. He never went off on tangents or acted on the spur of the moment, no matter what he’d have her believe. He was a man of action, yet he was silent. Perhaps what was happening between them was as difficult for him to acknowledge as it was for her.



He might think this was purely sexual attraction, but she knew better. Jack and Jill went up the hill and they were going to stay there.

"I think you'd better guess again, Kojak," she whispered, and raised herself up. "I don't believe that line of malarkey for one minute." Lowering herself slowly, she found the right place for both her lips and her hips. As Adam slid inside her he didn't argue with her choices.

For the next few days Adam refused to admit his growing feelings for Toni. He knew she was on a hopeless mission in looking for a renovation site, but she had to find that out for herself. Reluctantly he left her in the care of Fred and Annie during the day while he tried to find out who had left the chicken as a warning.

Once he saw a man standing in the woods beyond the clearing around Toni's house. A search of the area didn't turn up anybody, and he decided the man was one of the neighbors and not an intruder.

Burns hadn't been able to positively identify the man in the mug book, but the art department had come up with a composite sketch of what he looked like.

Other than the old prison farm, there were several other pieces of land and houses bordering the proposed Olympic complex site. The first few owners Adam contacted refused to admit they'd been approached by anybody with any strong-arm tactics. Late one afternoon he paid a visit on an old woman who operated a one-room grocery store in the front half of her house. The old woman was E.T.'s mother. Once she learned Adam was the officer who'd gotten her son out of jail, she didn't hold back.

"Sure," she said, letting a stream of tobacco juice fly past his trouser leg to the ground. "A man come by here with a pocketful of money, awanting to buy my little house."

"Did you sell?"

"Funny thing about that. Told him it didn't belong to me. I just rent it, like my mama before me. But he offered me a nice piece of change to buy my ... lease, I think he called it. He said they was going to sell this building and tear it down anyway. But I could stay right here until they got ready to do it. Then he'd move me into one of those high rises. He weren't pulling my leg, was he?"

"No," Adam reassured her. "I'm sure he wasn't. Did you sign anything?"

"Yes, sir, we signed a paper. Got it right in there in my cash register."

She let him see the agreement. The signature was that of a man he recognized, a maverick developer who'd been in trouble with the city for not living up to his minority-contracts agreements. Just last month the city had dropped his firm from the list of accepted bidders on city projects. Adam was beginning to understand what was happening. There was no reason to say anything, though, until he'd made more inquiries.

For the next three days, Adam followed a paper trail of sales options, each with a different signature. All the sellers identified the sketch Burns had provided as being the man they'd sold to.

Reporting to the mayor, Adam voiced his frustration. "Of course there was no secret that we were going after the Olympic games. Everybody knew the site would be in this area because the city already owns the land, so it's no surprise that somebody's buying

options on the outlying properties. If somebody wanted to put up the bucks, there's nothing illegal about that."

"But why?" the mayor asked. "If the Olympics fall through, they're stuck with options on land that isn't desirable."

"Yes, but remember the zoning change. From low-rent housing to commercial doubles the value instantly. The culprit is willing to gamble that the Olympics will push the price up even more. Besides, even if they lose on the games, they've got their options cheap before the zoning change becomes public knowledge."

"Still, the only real problem we have here, Adam, is the attempted bribery. And now we know who is behind that. Burns will have to testify. He'll probably get off, but the developer and his henchman will be prosecuted."

"At least, sooner or later there'll be housing built instead of factories," Adam said, thinking how pleased Toni would be.

Warrants were sworn out for the arrest of the developer and the associate who had attempted the payoff. At the same time a strong statement was issued that Toni Gresham wasn't the only witness to his wrongdoings. The property owners were also able to identify the perpetrator.

Later that night as Adam and Toni lay in bed, he told her the truth. "Secretly, for months, the developer has been buying up options on the property, expecting the Olympic site committee to approve Atlanta for the 1996 Summer Games. If the zoning change is approved, he holds the options on the land around the complex, with little initial outlay of cash."

"What will happen to all those people who gave him an option on their property if the Olympic committee chooses another site?"

"The mayor thinks the developer would let the options drop and the property owners would get to keep the advances."

"Either way, Burns will get off scot-free," Toni said in disgust.

"Looks like it. That's the way it goes sometimes, sweetheart. You win some and you lose some. At least we stand a good chance of getting the summer games here." He planted a satisfied kiss on her lips. She didn't respond.

"What's wrong, outlaw?"

"The system, that's what. The city makes a lot of money from the tourists. Burns doesn't get punished. I lose the prison farm. The Swan Gardens people lose a possible home, all because of something that may not even happen."

"But Toni, face it. You could never have turned the prison farm into a good place to live anyway. Helping people one-on-one is fine, but be realistic. You can't take on a whole housing project. That's misleading those tenants just as much as the developer was misleading the property owners by not telling them about the zoning change. Your plan was unrealistic and it's over, Toni. Let's put it behind us."

"Unrealistic? What you mean is, stop trying to do something that seems impossible. Not by the hair of your chinny, chin chin, Adam Ware." She sprang to her feet. She couldn't give up on this, as her parents had done on the mill after her grandfather died. "You're just like everybody else, willing to think small. You don't even begin to

understand what I want to accomplish. But you're right about its being over. I'm out of danger now, aren't I?"

Adam had a bad feeling about what was happening. "Yes, you are. They have the man who left the chicken in your sink in custody. Why?"

"Then put on your pants and go home, Kojak. I've worked too hard for too long to give up now. If you don't feel the same way I do, then hit the road, Jack."

"You mean those Swan Gardens people are more important than us?"

No, she wanted to say, but the truth was that Adam didn't love her. "I guess," she said slowly, "there isn't any us, Adam."

She was ending it. Adam was speechless at first, then angry. Surely he was more important to Toni than this. But one look at her face and that hope died instantly. She was serious. She was telling him to go. He pushed back the sheet and stood, staring at her in disbelief.

"Why, Toni?"

"Because I have to. This isn't some little project that didn't work out. This is what I do, Adam. It's important to me. Can't you understand? I need to do this. I need to."

He pulled on his underwear and pants, tucked his shirt in, and jabbed his feet into his shoes. "No, I don't. I'm in love with you, Toni Gresham, and what you need is me. I loved my father, too, but he was always gone, taking care of business. He never had time for me and one day he didn't come home again. Sooner or later, if you find time for me among all those people who are so important to you, well, you know where I am."

Toni was stunned. He'd said the words she wanted to hear. Adam had said he loved her and he was walking out. She grabbed the sheet and wrapped it around her as she followed him, stumbling when her feet tangled in wads of cloth.

"Adam, wait."

"And another thing," he called over his shoulder. "You might just want to ask those Swan Gardens people what they want, instead of satisfying your own ego without asking."

Then he was gone and her teacup was silent. The magic was gone. The steel columns began to creak and groan and Toni shivered in the darkness.

What was wrong with him? He of all people ought to understand what she was trying to do. She wasn't going to leave him. She wasn't like his father. But he couldn't be sure of that, could he? Toni sighed. They were both fighting their pasts. Her family hadn't been bad guys as she'd always thought. They hadn't had a choice in closing the mill. And they might be interested in helping if she opened up and gave them a chance. Adam needed her. He needed her to show him that they could make a real difference—together. And she needed him because ... because ...

"Oh, damn," she muttered.

But somebody had to take a stand. Why was it that she understood and Adam didn't? As for asking the Swan Gardens people what they wanted, she didn't need to do that, did she?

The next morning brought her answer. At a hastily called meeting for the tenants, she

heard their hesitant answers. They wanted trees and gardens and a park, maybe a place to raise some flowers and vegetables, somewhere away from downtown. In truth, the old prison farm was a bad idea.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she asked in a choked voice.

“We didn’t want to hurt your feelings, Toni,” Willie Benson answered. “It seemed to be so important to you and you’ve been good to us.”

“To me? But everything I’ve done has been for you, not me. I’m so sorry, gang. I don’t know what to do now.”

“Why not ask Adam, Toni?” someone said hesitantly. “He seems like a levelheaded young man.”

“I see.” Levelheaded was what they wanted, not someone impetuous like her. Adam would never have commandeered the prison farm. He would never have decided to renovate it and move a group of old people in without consulting them about the move. But she had.

The tenants tried to console her by explaining that they’d never expected her to perform the miracle anyway. They’d already begun to make plans to move.

“Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn,” she muttered miserably under her breath as Fred drove her to the old thread mill to pick up her car. She left him to take stock of the supplies they stored in one of the old buildings and went back to her house.

Adam had been right about her all along. She’d gone charging off to save the world without asking the world whether or not it wanted to be saved. She’d studied engineering in order to build buildings. She taught in the vocational system to train people to earn a living. She gathered her own little band of admirers around her so that she could do great good without ever examining her motives. Could she have been wrong?

No, the goals weren’t wrong, but maybe her methods had been. She’d failed miserably and in the process she’d lost Adam. For the first time since she was a very little girl, Toni wanted a shoulder to cry on. She wanted her mother’s shoulder to cry on. She hit the brakes, turned her car around, and headed for Riverside Drive. She didn’t know what would happen, and she’d never done it before, but she was going to ask her mother for some advice.

“The king is in his counting house, counting out his money.” The king and money, that was it! Money and prestige had ruined her project, and money and prestige would have to fix it. After all, the good ole boys always took care of their own, and her father belonged to that club. For the first time in her life, she’d asked for his help too.

But it wasn't her father Toni went to first when she rushed into her parents' house.

"Mother?" Toni raced up the stairs, knocked on her mother's door, and burst inside. "Mother, I need to talk to you."

Mrs. Gresham looked up at Toni, her expression puzzled. "Is there something wrong, dear?"

"Yes, there is, Mother. I need ... I need to talk to you." Her voice was choked by a lump in her throat the size of a goose egg.

"You do?" Alice Gresham stared in astonishment for a long moment, then quickly rose and took her daughter into her arms. "I mean, you really need me?"

There was a pleasure in her voice that couldn't be disguised. "I'm here, darling. What can I do?"

By that time Toni was forcing back the threat of tears, hating herself for the display of weakness. Yet she knew, even as she and her mother sank down onto the satin-covered bed, that her tears were cleansing. "I've lost him, Mother. And I don't know what to do."

"You mean Adam?" Mrs. Gresham let Toni sob until she seemed to grow calm, then reached into her pocket and pulled out a small embroidered handkerchief. "I very much doubt that. Now, blow your nose and tell me what happened."

Toni took a deep breath and followed her mother's instructions. Alice Gresham didn't sound stern. Rather, she seemed genuinely concerned. Toni lifted her head and gazed at her mother. There was a shy, hesitant look in her mother's eyes that suggested she didn't know quite how to proceed.

"Oh, Mother, I've ruined your blouse."

"Who cares about the blouse? Toni, you're what's important."

And suddenly, as Toni told her mother what had happened, the walls came tumbling down, walls built higher every year without either mother or daughter knowing how to stop it.

"And you were really going to spend the night in that awful place?"

"I thought I was."

"And Councilman Burns was taking a bribe to change the zoning ordinance? Our friend Richard Burns?"

"I'm sorry, Mother, but he was."

"Well, I never did like him. He always ate all the shrimp. Now he's ruined your plan and you haven't been able to find another building. He certainly ought to be punished. Let's call your father up here. He'll bring it up before the country club committee."

"Mother." Toni laughed in spite of her pain. "You're wonderful. But that isn't the worst thing." She lowered her eyes as she tried to find the words to tell her mother the truth. "I've been so busy with the Swan Gardens people that I ... lost Adam."

"Now, darling, from what I saw at lunch that day, I doubt that it would be that easy

for you to lose Adam. Maybe you just misplaced him a bit.”

“It isn’t just that I didn’t make time for him. I refused to look at any other way of doing things. I ignored him, just like his father did. That’s the way I am. I get my mind set on something and I don’t listen. I didn’t even ask the Swan Gardens people what they wanted. Not me. Toni Gresham, Robin Hood to the world, just charged ahead with her blinders on.”

“Oh, darling,” Alice Gresham said with a sigh, “that’s so easy to do. Believe me, I know. I let it happen between us. I closed my eyes. When your grandfather filled your head with dreams and high ideals, I never said a word. I never wanted to face you with the truth.”

“What truth, Mother? Grandfather was the most wonderful man I ever knew.”

“Yes, he was, and no, he wasn’t.” Alice stood and walked over to the window. “Your grandfather was a sweet, dear, totally unrealistic man. He borrowed money from your trust fund, sold off family assets, all to hide what was happening. Instead of accepting the truth about the mill and changing the way he’d always done business, he simply continued to operate as he always had. He paid people that he didn’t need to make thread and yarn that nobody wanted to buy.

“In short, Toni, the mill lost money for years, but he refused to believe it. Finally, when he died, we found out there was nothing left but debt. We had to sell off part of the mill to pay the bills. There wasn’t enough left to modernize and compete. That’s why the mill was closed down.”

“I never knew. I thought it was you and father, that you sold the mill and caused all those poor people to lose their jobs because you didn’t want to carry on Grandfather’s business.”

“You blamed your father and me?” Alice was shocked. “I knew that you changed, but we thought it was because of your grandfather’s death. You two were so close. You adored your grandfather and we decided not to disillusion you. You were just a child.”

This time it was Toni who held out her arms and comforted her mother. “So many years,” she whispered, “and how wrong I was.” She’d kept punishing her mother until Alice had become distant and cold.

“Well, Toni,” her mother finally said, “maybe it isn’t too late. Let’s see what can be done to solve your problem.”

By midafternoon, with her parents’ help, Toni had come up with a solution and offered her plan to the tenants. By late afternoon, they’d enthusiastically agreed to her idea and insisted they be allowed to participate as well. The man with the missing finger was one of four former carpenters who lived in the Gardens. An electrician and a plumber were also among the renters, and they volunteered. They were retired, but they weren’t completely useless.

Toni was stunned to realize that the Swan Gardens residents would willingly have done many of the projects she’d commandeered if she’d approached the project differently. Once again she had charged in without asking.

Finally only one chore was left, the democratic selection of a representative to ask city hall to permit their project. The tenants voted. They chose Adam Ware and they

asked Toni to tell him their plan.

Suddenly Toni wasn't so confident of her scheme. Moving mountains had always been easy. Facing Adam was hard. How could they possibly work together without his learning that she was in love with him? They couldn't.

*You know where I am*, Adam had said. In her heart she knew she hadn't any choice. She would go to him. She'd always taken risks for other people. Now, she'd take one for herself. She'd tell him she was in love with him. She was not going to give up on him, or her projects. But she'd learned how wrong she'd been in her hell-for-leather approach.

There might be something to be said for working through the establishment. Family was important, too. Once she'd asked for help, even her father had offered his assistance. If she could only fare as well with Adam. But even if he didn't love her, she'd still ask for his help. First she'd go home and change, though. Looking her best couldn't hurt.

She saw his van first, then she saw Adam hurrying down her steps as she pulled into her drive. Still big and mean looking, he'd combed his hair, but he hadn't shaved. Dressed in worn jeans and scuffed running shoes, he looked as though he'd pulled on the first things he'd come to and run out the door. On seeing her he came to a stop and stared at her.

"Adam, I—"

"Toni, I was—"

They both broke off, and suddenly she was in his arms. She didn't remember moving.

"Oh, Adam, I was so wrong. I had a long talk with my family this morning. You were right. My grandfather wasn't what I thought he was. And it wasn't my parents' fault that the mill had to be closed. All my life I tried to make up for what I thought my parents had done and all the time it was him."

"I know," Adam said. He lifted her in his arms and climbed the steps two at a time, kissing her hungrily as he kicked the door closed. "He was a good man, but terribly unrealistic. I just came from talking with your father."

She stared at him for a long moment as he set her on her feet. "I learned a lot about myself today, Adam. I was self-righteous and condescending, a worse snob than I've ever accused my mother of being."

"You may have been wrong about how you went about it, but you weren't wrong about the end result. And you were right about me. Upholding the law is only one part of serving the people, Toni. That's the easy part, because all the rules are laid out for you. You? You take risks, but you give from the heart and that's scary. Taking risks is that gray area I refused to see."

"Oh, Adam, we meant well, but we were both wrong."

"Not about everything, outlaw." He grinned. "You and me, we're right together and that's what I was coming to tell you."

She let out a long breath. "On that I totally agree. I've—we've found a place for the Swan Gardens people. The old Gresham Mill Village. The Greshams will donate the property. The tenants *and* my students will do the work, and Father is going to head the fund-raising end of the project, if you'll agree to help."

"That's a sound idea, Toni. I think you've pulled it off. I never doubted that you would."

"But Adam," she said shyly, "I don't think I can do it without your help." She dropped her head, pressing herself against his chest. "I don't even want to try."

He tipped up her chin with his fingertip. "The last time I helped you, you almost got killed over at the prison farm. I have to tell you, outlaw, I can't drive a straight nail."

"Oh, I can do that, Adam. I just need you to love me, to keep me safe and share my dreams. I never want to be scared of the dark again. Please love me, Adam."

"Love you, Toni? I could never not love you. Since you swung out of that tree, you wiped out the line between black and white. Without you, my whole life is gray. I not only lost you, but you made me face the truth about myself."

"But you're always truthful, Adam."

"I thought I was. I thought I was helping the people I grew up with, but deep in my heart, I didn't really believe that I could change anything. So I wasn't disappointed when everything remained the same. I accepted failure and made it a part of everything I did."

"You're wrong, Adam! You're an example to every one of those kids and you care. That's what they need."

"I still think they have to help themselves, but I've changed my mind about the way I'll help them."

"How?"

"It was something you said, Toni, about basketball leagues and schedules. That set me to thinking. Why not have a real, official team, with snappy uniforms and schedules? My guys are as good as anybody. They need to know that. That's where I was wrong. How can I make them believe in themselves if I don't?"

"That's a wonderful idea, Adam. And maybe, if Gresham Mill works out, we could refurbish some of the other buildings and bring in some of your Cabbage Town people and Fred and Annie. We'll put together a joint project between the young and the old. What do you think?"

"I think you'd better marry me quick, outlaw. This time I forgot to plan ahead. I came totally unprepared."

"Adam Ware, I love you." She grinned and gave him a familiar saucy wiggle. "If you're sure a cop can love an outlaw who lives in a fairy tale, I'll marry you tomorrow."

He slid his hands down to hold her hips, clasping her to him as he said hoarsely, "You cast a spell over me the first time you kissed me, my darling renegade. I've stopped worrying about tomorrow."

"Good. Then we don't have to wait. You don't have any objections to my behaving rashly in the bedroom, do you, Captain Ware?" With quick, impatient motions she worked her fingers between them and tugged his zipper down.

"Objections?" He groaned as she touched him. "Not me. How many men ever get to live in a magic teacup in an enchanted forest? I've become a man of the moment, and being loved by you is as close to Oz as I ever want to be."

"By the way, outlaw, you never did tell me why you called Baba Yaga's house a



teacup. According to what I read, she flew in a mortar and guided it with a pestle.” They were lying in bed, their legs tangled, Toni’s face against his chest.

“It wasn’t me,” she answered reluctantly. “It was my grandfather. He told me that she flew in a magic teacup. I believed that too.”

Adam felt her stiffen. He realized that Toni had been forced to rethink her entire life in one day. She’d loved her grandfather. And he must have loved her too. Adam would stake his reputation on the fact that the old crook hadn’t deliberately misrepresented himself. That was just his way of keeping Toni out of the darkness.

“Do you think that maybe”—he hesitated, saying a small prayer that his words wouldn’t destroy what they’d just shared—“maybe your grandfather had his own pair of rose-colored glasses?”

Toni grew very still.

“Just consider,” Adam went on. “Suppose he got caught up in his own dream of success and responsibility, of continuing the family business. After all, the mill was old, the equipment out-of-date. Foreign imports were killing him. What could he do?”

“I don’t know. My parents couldn’t do anything. They were forced to close the mill.”

“But your grandfather couldn’t do that. Instead he laughed and joked and made the workers feel good, as long as he could, just as he did for you.”

“He turned something drab into a dream, didn’t he?” Toni said as something inside her began to glow. “Like turning a mortar into a teacup.” She raised up and gazed at him, her eyes bright with tears of joy. “Oh, you wonderful, wonderful man. Kiss me, before I die of loving you.”

“Come here, outlaw.” He smoothed the hair from her face and kissed her lips, already parted in readiness.

The ripple of happiness that shot through her left her breathless with desire. He rolled over, carrying her with him, and gazed down at her with euphoria.

Neither Adam nor Toni heard the wind. When the teacup began to sway, they simply smiled and attributed it to the magic of their love.

## The Editor's Corner

Welcome to Loveswept!

*March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb*, and so do our Loveswept romances, enticing stories ready to seduce you all month long. Take a look at this list!

***Just One Night*** finishes up Lauren Layne's Sex, Love & Stiletto series featuring Sam Compton, the hero we've all been waiting for. New York's hottest "sexpert," Riley McKenna, has been living a lie, and it's up to one man to keep her honest ... all night long. *Dream It* introduces a new hot series by Jennifer Chance with the tale of a smoldering rocker and the fangirl who catches his eye. And ***Third Degree***, Julie Cross's new Flirt release, is one you don't want to miss in the new adult coming-of-age scene. Marshall Collins gives Izzy Jenkins all the normalcy she's looking for while Izzy teaches Marshall a thing or two of her own.

Classic Loveswept romances are back, too, and this month Sandra Chastain's ***Adam's Outlaw*** and ***The Runaway Bride*** top the list, followed by Fran Baker's ***San Antonio Rose***. And don't miss Linda Cajio's delightful ***Night Music***, coming on the heels of Karen Leabo's suspenseful and spirited ***Witchy Woman***. Deborah Harmse's charming and warmly passionate romance, ***A Man to Believe in***, will touch your heart, and *New York Times* bestselling author Iris Johansen's rerelease of ***Satin Ice*** continues with the Delaney family saga.

Last but not least, always a favorite of ours, *New York Times* bestselling author Connie Brockway sweeps us back to Victorian England with her enchanting stories ***Bridal Favors*** and ***Bridal Season***.

Let Loveswept warm you on those cold winter nights.

~Happy Romance!



Gina Wachtel  
Associate Publisher



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For Bob Knight, the wonderful man who answered all my dumb computer questions, solved my problems, and found everything I ever lost. I couldn't have done it without him.

The book cover features a muscular man in a cowboy hat and an open denim shirt, posing in a field at sunset. The background is a warm, golden-hued landscape with a line of trees in the distance. The man's arms are raised, holding the brim of his hat. The title 'Adam's Outlaw' is written in a large, white, serif font, with the 'A' being particularly large and stylized. Below the title is a decorative flourish. The author's name 'Sandra Chastain' is at the bottom in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font. In the top right corner, there is a small, stylized logo consisting of the letters 'L' and 'S' intertwined.

LS

# ADAM'S OUTLAW



SANDRA CHASTAIN